

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
January 31, 2021

Seeking Loneliness

Luke 5:12-16

"You're quarantined for seven days. At the end of that week, come back and I'll check you again to determine if you've recovered or if we need to extend the quarantine for a second week." That's what the priest told the man with leprosy. The priest was just following what the Jewish law required regarding the detection and treatment of the disease. So he also told the leprosy man, "Remember, you have to wear torn clothing and disheveled hair and live either alone or with other lepers. When approached by another person, you have to cover your upper lip and call out, 'Unclean, unclean.' Now, here's a printed copy of the rules that you can take with you. I'll see you in a week."

We don't know why this man with leprosy violated the rules, but he's soon back out in public. Maybe word has gotten around, especially on social media, about Jesus' mighty works, particularly the healings he has performed, so the leper decides it's worth breaking the rules and taking a chance. After all, the priest is only in a position to pronounce him clean or unclean, whereas Jesus has the power to set him free from the disease itself. Right now, all the leper knows is that Jesus is capable. The question is whether Jesus is willing.

In the midst of the crowd of sick and hurting people, with cries for help all around him, is Jesus willing to give this man his time and attention? Is Jesus willing to enter into this man's isolation and confinement? Is Jesus willing to cross the religious and cultural boundaries that keep this man cut off from wholeness and community? Is Jesus willing?

"I am willing," said Jesus. "Be clean!" Jesus speaks words of healing. But Jesus does more than just heal the man with a word. Jesus combines speech with touch. This is no long-distance cleansing, no miracle from miles away. No, Jesus makes physical contact with the man, which technically makes Jesus unclean as well. Jesus' compassion isn't bound by the Mosaic law or by natural human reactions. No, his care reaches into and through what might be considered prohibited space, so that the life-giving will of God can be accomplished. The man was made whole. The leprosy left him. No seven-day quarantine. No waiting period.

Jesus then instructs him not to start broadcasting the news, but to head straight to the priest for inspection and to get his health clearance. This includes offering thanksgiving to God, the ultimate source of the man's deliverance. The bottom line is that God, through Jesus, has brought him out of the isolation of his illness and into the connectedness of cleansing. He has been restored to health and restored to community among the people of God.

Wherever you encounter illness, you'll often encounter isolation. During the coronavirus pandemic, isolation, quarantine, sheltering in place, and social distancing have become a way of life. Disease has forced us to separate from one another. And this separation afflicts us. It works against God's will for us, which is life and wholeness. The wholeness that God intends for us involves connectedness and communion, with God and with one another. We aren't created for disease and distancing. We're made for relatedness and unity.

Earlier this week, our church's insurance company sent us an email with a video that contained snippets of interviews with customers, talking about what they're looking forward to doing once the threat of the virus has diminished. The voices were coupled with images of people doing things that have seemed increasingly strange to us. Individuals actually hugging each other, coworkers shaking hands, extended families gathering for a meal, worshipers arriving at church without masks, children outside playing together, residents of assisted living centers gathering for a birthday party. In one way or another, all the personal stories and images had to do with an end to isolation and restoration to a deeper sense of community.

Until that time comes, we're still navigating our way through experiences of separation and isolation, which for many people inevitably involves loneliness. Loneliness isn't something that pops up occasionally, here and there. No, loneliness is epidemic, especially during circumstances like the present. Huge numbers of people who were already experiencing a lack of human contact and interaction have been even further cut off from connection with others. We've seen and heard a lot about this struggle in the lives of nursing home residents.

Then there's the issue of technology, which can sometimes leave us feeling simultaneously connected and disconnected. About a decade ago, Sherry Turkle wrote a book titled *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. In addition to describing the way that our devices change the way we communicate and interact with each other, Turkle also talks about what this means for who we are as human beings. She says, "These days, whether you are online or not, it is easy for people to end up unsure if they are closer together or further apart."¹

Vivek H. Murthy served as Surgeon General of the United States from 2014 to 2017. He once wrote:

During my tenure as US surgeon general ... [and] my years caring for patients, the most common pathology I saw was not heart disease or diabetes; it was loneliness. The elderly man who came to our hospital every few weeks seeking relief from chronic pain was also looking for human connection: He was lonely. The middle-aged woman battling advanced HIV who had no one to call to inform that she was sick: She was lonely too. I found that loneliness was often in the background of clinical illness, contributing to disease and making it harder for patients to cope and heal.²

Over time, we've learned more and more about the health implications of loneliness. We now know that it's associated with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, depression, and anxiety. So loneliness is more than just an emotional affliction. It takes its toll on us in our entirety. As one person has put it, "... when you are lonely, your whole body is lonely."³ It's no wonder that many leaders have identified loneliness as a matter of public health. In 2018, Great Britain even appointed a "minister of loneliness," to oversee efforts to address the problem at a national level.

Closer to home, in our own community, our congregation, and in your own household, social isolation may be taking its toll, psychologically, emotionally, and physically. When loneliness threatens, our connectedness as a church, the resilience of our fellowship, is one way the healing power of Christ shows up. As the great preacher Charles Spurgeon noted, "Communion is strength; solitude is weakness. Alone, the free old beech yields to the blast and lies prone on the meadow. In the forest, supporting each other, the trees laugh at the hurricane. The sheep of Jesus flock together. The social element is the genius of Christianity."⁴

During the pandemic, including our recent pause in in-person worship, we've had to flock together using alternative methods. Through online sermons, emails, text messages, phone calls, cards, food deliveries, and other forms of Christian connection, we've crossed barriers that try to keep us apart, from one another and from our Lord. Remember that the restoring presence of Jesus is still manifested in all the ways that we seek out one another, and reach out to one another, in the midst of our separation. The time and place may be different, but our Lord's word and touch are still just as near.

Mother Theresa once said, "The biggest disease today is not leprosy or cancer. It's the feeling of being uncared for, unwanted—of being deserted and alone."⁵ We don't require people who've tested positive for COVID-19 to go around saying, "Unclean, unclean." But we still know the realities of illness and isolation. We know the suffering that comes with disease and distance. But we also know the wholeness that comes through Jesus Christ. We know that he not only has the power to restore us, but also the desire to do so. As he said to the man with leprosy, "I am willing." In Jesus, capacity and compassion are joined, and isolation can be overcome.

Dallas Willard, who lost his mom when he was a young child, once wrote about another little boy whose mom had died. Because he was especially sad and lonely at night, the boy would come into his father's room and ask if he could sleep with him. But even then, he couldn't rest until he knew not only that he was with his father, but that his father's face was turned toward him. "Father, is your face turned toward me now?" "Yes," his father would say. "You are not alone. I'm with you. My face is turned toward you." When the boy was assured of this, he could finally rest.⁶

In Jesus Christ, God has turned his face toward us. You're not alone. The Lord is with you. He sees your face. In fact, Jesus himself knows what it's like to seek the face of God. That's what we find him doing at the end of today's text. Luke closes this healing miracle with a reminder that far from being lonely, Jesus was so in demand that he was frequently overwhelmed by the crowds. He regularly struggled with the issue of too many people, not too few people. And so, Luke says, "Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed" (v. 16).

Here is our Lord, not trying to escape loneliness, but actually seeking it out. This wasn't about having some me time. It was about having some God time. Jesus knew that his power wasn't his own. It came from God. So by withdrawing, on a regular basis, to lonely places, desert places, wilderness places, Jesus reconnected with the source of his life and ministry. Our Lord knew that in order to face the multitude, he had to embrace the solitude.

Ruth Haley Barton writes, "Not only does the love of God come to us in solitude, the love of God begins to pour through us to others."⁷ During this time when loneliness afflicts so many, your own experiences of isolation can become an opportunity to cultivate solitude. Whatever empty, lonely space you find yourself in, you can use it as an invitation to get alone with God, to be with God, to be restored in his power, and then to go, in some form and some way, into the isolation that others are experiencing, so that by your presence they may know the word and touch of the Lord.

¹ From an excerpt of Turkle's book at the Moyers on Democracy website. October 17, 2013. Accessed June 12, 2020 <<https://billmoyers.com/content/book-excerpt-alone-together-why-we-expect-more-from-technology-and-less-from-each-other/>>.

² Vivek H. Murthy, "Work and the Loneliness Epidemic." *Harvard Business Review* (August 2017).

³ Stephen Marche, "Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?" *The Atlantic* (May 2012).

⁴ Quoted in *Christianity Today*, Vol. 38, No. 13.

⁵ Quoted in *Leadership*, Vol. 1, No. 4.

⁶ This story is summarized by John Ortberg, "God Is Closer than You Think." Dallas Willard Center
<<https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2017/may/5052217.html>>.

⁷ Ruth Haley Barton, *Invitation to Solitude and Silence* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004) n.p.