



WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Lonely
Ed Sutter

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My freshmen year of college, like many freshmen years of college, was an experience to remember. Our dorm's quiet hours spanned from, if I recall correctly, 11 p.m. to 8 a.m. each night, but my floor took it upon ourselves to institute what we called 'loud hours' from 2 a.m. to 3 a.m. several times a week. On top of that, though I honestly don't know why, Raffi's hit song, "Banana Phone" was played with such regularity that visitors came to expect it.

The 39 young men that lived on my floor had a ridiculous bond with one another...we spent hours together laughing, playing, adventuring and sometimes even studying together. And never in my life have I felt more lonely than I did in those first few months.

You see, simply being surrounded by people doesn't preclude you from loneliness. Even being a member of a tightly knit community isn't always enough to guard against loneliness. Loneliness has haunted men and women since the very beginning of scripture.

I heard an interview on the radio just a week or so back, someone asked the question, "What was the first 'bad' in the Bible?" My mind immediately jumped to the serpent's misdirection, or Adam and Eve's sidestepping of God's command. Perhaps like me, you guessed something similar – and like me, you'd have missed it.

"Loneliness," the speaker continued, "was the first 'bad' in scripture."

"It is not good for man to be alone" we see God say. Ever since this first articulation of loneliness, and ever since, the very same has been true. It is not good for us to be alone. Now, let me qualify this right away – there is a

difference between being alone and being lonely. Oftentimes, “alone” comes as a choice, an intentional move, and regularly a rejuvenating one at that. At several points we see Jesus depart from the crowds in order to be alone. Alone often implies a choice.

Lonely is not a choice. Lonely is a consequence.

Lonely is the result of disconnection. That disconnection can be a result of misunderstanding, apathy, shame, isolation or ignorance. Lonely can happen in a room full of people. My guess is that loneliness is here with us this morning.

Loneliness is crafty. Sometimes loneliness blames you for its mere existence. Anxiety tells you to be afraid, or at least cautious of whatever’s out there, so we pull back – a misguided use of our fight or flight instincts. Depression tells you that no one understands, that the effort wouldn’t be worth it – ignoring the fact that our physical chemistry, our literal biology, is designed so that we are healthier when we connect with those around us. Loneliness tells you that no one gets it, that no one is there, that no one hears you.

Loneliness doesn’t need silence or solitude, in fact, loneliness is often most potent when we’re surrounded with other people. “I’m the only who feels this way.” “I’m the only one going through this.” “I’m the only one who...fill in the blank for yourself.” Loneliness steals the truth that each of us is a part of something bigger than any of us.

You and I need one another. We need each other because, at some point, every single one of us will forget that someone out there cares. That we’re not alone. We see it happening it in this very community– people stand up to tell

their story – not for the sake of the spotlight or a few minutes of fame, but to build connections, maybe your story is similar. We hear it in the way that both the youth and the adults describe their involvement – “this place feels like a family.”

The only antidote to loneliness is community. Not the kind of community that we tuck in our shirts and shine our shoes for – but the kind of community that says, “You’re valuable because you’re here, and because you’re here, you’re one of us.” This kind of community only happens when we open up, when we let our guard down, when we let vulnerability get some traction.

We must fight back against shame – the notion that who I really am is something that needs to be hidden. It’s what we see as an immediate consequence of sin entering our world. Adam and Eve hid, ashamed at their nakedness, at who God created them to be.

So many of us spend our lives hiding in the bushes, afraid to let the real us show. Some of us who are in hiding, out of shame or anxiety or depression or grief...some of us need to come out of hiding. We’re called to this. Others of us need to recognize that some who are in isolation aren’t there because they want to be, but are there because they can’t see enough light from where they stand to move forward.

We’re called to connect with our brothers and sisters, we’re called beyond what we may choose for ourselves, to act not just for our well-being, but for all those around us who feel left out, unheard, misunderstood, ashamed...for those who feel like the only one.

You were knit together by your God in such a way that you hurt when others hurt, that you are healthier, happier and more fulfilled when you connect with others. We don't get to choose whether or not we are called to this – you have been called to connect with others in the world around you.

You do however get to choose how you respond. You could bring light into the darkness of isolation. You could proclaim freedom for those who feel trapped. You could provide hope and love to the brokenhearted. You could do those things, but will you?

Will you connect with the community around you? Will you respond to the call that God has put in each of our lives? That part is up to you.



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