

At the Corner of Loneliness and God

Genesis 2:18

We are in a series called *At the Corner of Life and God* and we're looking at how God wants to intersect with our lives in the "everyday-ness" of our lives. He wants to connect with us, not just one hour every Sunday, but throughout the week and throughout the day, at the point where our lives are most real, and often most messy.

This morning I want you to meet me at the corner of loneliness and God. Loneliness isn't something we talk about a lot. I realized that in 20 years of preaching, I don't believe I've ever preached a message specifically on loneliness. People will sometimes admit that they're discouraged or dealing with physical or financial issues or need prayer for losing their temper, but in my experience it's very rare for someone to say, "I'm struggling with loneliness and could use prayer." It feels like one of those things we can't share – which can make us feel all the more lonely.

But the truth is that loneliness is a universal human experience and we all deal with it at some point in our life. It can look different and have different intensities from person to person but in one way or another we all experience it. You can't judge loneliness by its cover – it crosses personality type lines. We might think that quiet people tend to be more lonely than more out-going, gregarious people. That introverts are more vulnerable to being lonely than extroverts, but I don't think that's true. It is true that one of the differences between introverted people and extroverted people is how they process interactions with people. Extroverts derive energy from being with people, introverts drain their energy from being with people and they need to be alone to recharge. Extroverts often enjoy big events and large groups. Introverts in general prefer one on one interactions over group interactions. These differences are God-given differences in our personalities so whether you are an introvert or an extrovert (or, like most of us, a mix of the two), your personality type was uniquely formed by your Creator and it would be wrong for you to try to be something that God didn't create you to be.

We can't judge loneliness by the external. The quieter person who doesn't say much in group settings might have a strong sense of relational connectedness and not feel lonely at all and the life-of-the-party guy who wears the lampshade at the party and leaves everyone laughing might feel very empty and isolated at the end of the day with a heart that is aching with loneliness. See, loneliness isn't the same thing as being alone. Being alone can often be refreshing, invigorating, and enjoyable. And being with people isn't always a cure for loneliness – sometimes it can be just the opposite. For a person struggling with loneliness, a crowd can often be one of the loneliest places to be.

Loneliness is, at its core, feeling isolated and cut off from deep and meaningful companionship. It's an unfulfilled longing for intimate relationship with others and with God. A longing to know and be known. To love and be loved. God created us with a deep longing and need to connect, to have relationship with others. In Gen. 1, as God created the heavens and the earth, after each creative act God saw that it was good. In chapter 2, after creating man, God looks at everything He has created and calls it very good. But in chapter 2:18 God sees the first thing in all creation that is *not* good:

It is not good that man should be alone; I will make a helper fit for him. Vs. 18.

It was not good for Adam to remain alone, so God created Eve, a helper who was perfectly designed for Adam. Now if you're single and struggling with loneliness, I don't want you to focus in on that and think, "my only hope of not feeling alone is to get married." This passage does tell us that one of the reasons God ordained marriage is to provide life-long companionship between a man and woman, it's true. But we also need to remember that God was *finishing* the creation He began. If Adam had remained alone it would have been a dead end street for mankind and there would have been no human companionship for Adam – marriage or otherwise. From Adam and Eve's relationship children and grandchildren and greatgrandchildren would come and relationships would begin to branch out in a hundred directions.

So as beautiful as marriage is, I want to underline that the Bible does not equate singleness with loneliness or lack of human companionship. Jesus never got married, and I think it is safe to say that Jesus was by no means a lonely man. Elijah and Elisha, as well as the greatest prophet who ever lived, John the Baptist, and the greatest apostle who ever lived, the apostle Paul, never married and you could not characterize their lives as lonely or unfulfilled. So being single doesn't mean being lonely. And being married isn't a guarantee that you won't be lonely. There are many married people who feel a deep sense of loneliness. If you're single and struggling with loneliness, don't think that getting married will end your loneliness. Enjoy your singleness and build relationships and friendships for the value of those relationships, not because one of them might lead to marriage. And if it is in your heart to get married – which is a wonderful thing - choose carefully who you marry or you might find yourself *more* lonely in marriage than you ever were single. If you are a Christian, do everything you can to be sure that the person you marry is a strong Christian too because there is nothing lonelier than not being able to share the deepest center and the greatest treasure of your life – which is Christ – with your spouse.

Having said this, let's go to the corner of loneliness and consider how God meets us in our loneliness.

I. Loneliness is a spiritual condition more than it's a social condition

Loneliness didn't begin in Gen. 2, it began in Gen. 3. Adam wasn't lonely, he was alone. If God left Adam alone eventually he would have become lonely but loneliness wasn't an inherent part of the human condition until Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Let's read Gen 3:8-13

And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." (Genesis 3:8-12)

This is the point at which loneliness became an inherent part of the human experience. Sin's first action was to fragment all their relationships. Until they disobeyed God, Adam and Eve had enjoyed walking with God in intimate fellowship, now they are hiding from God. For the first time in their lives they feel shame— shame, whether real or undeserved, causes us to want to hide who we really are from others, so that we don't get close to people. We hide in different ways: often we try to project an image that's not who we really are as a way of hiding the real us from others because we fear that the real us would be rejected. Another way we hide is by withdrawing – we pull away from interactions with people because we fear loneliness less than we fear the risk and discomfort of relationships. Some hide by avoiding interactions with people and some hide by cracking jokes and wearing lamp shades on their heads at parties. For some people, being outgoing, and gregarious is a way of keeping others at arm's length, but when they're alone, they feel a deep sadness of isolation and loneliness. They just hide behind their life of the party façade. This is why we can't judge by externals, because we all hide in different ways.

Sin also leads to conflict and relational breakdown between Adam and Eve and God. Adam blames Eve as a way of escaping the consequences of his actions, no doubt leaving Eve feeling like she was "thrown under the bus". Adam also insinuates blame towards God: *the woman you gave me...* Sin fragmented relationships right at the outset and it fragments relationships to this day. Conflicts often break relationships and friendships apart but the root of those conflicts go deeper than what he said to you, or what she did to you. It goes back to the garden – because of sin we have an inevitable bend towards hurting and blaming and disappointing and betraying. Relationships break because we are broken people.

It can be tempting to focus on whatever social conditions we face and blame them for our sense of disconnect from people around us. And those things might be very real things and we probably do need to look at them – especially at the things that we contribute to the disconnect – but we can never get at the heart of loneliness if we simply look at it as a social issue that needs social answers. *I need more friends, I need better friends, I need different friends.* We need to recognize the deeper relational challenge we have is due to sin. Sin fragments relationships, sin causes separation in relationships, sin presses us to hide and withdraw so that no one sees who we really are. And yet, at the same point that we feel safe (because no one sees who we really are) we also feel lonely (because no one sees who we really are and accepts us for who we really are). Fortunately, there is hope for us in our loneliness.

II. God wants to meet us in our loneliness to draw us near to Christ

In a sense, loneliness is like a wilderness of the heart. When the Bible speaks of the wilderness it's referring to a wild and desolate place where survival is on the line. For those who have experienced deep loneliness, it can feel that raw, that desolate. Jesus came to save us from our sin, and that includes our feelings of loneliness. Jesus identifies with our loneliness. He began his ministry by withdrawing to a lonely, desolate wilderness for 40 days. He ended his earthly ministry by enduring the separation from God that we deserve because of sin. On the cross Jesus cried out, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* Jesus felt bitterly alone on the cross, forsaken by God. God turned His face away from Jesus as He laid on him all our sin.

²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. 2 Cor. 5:21

Loneliness reminds us that something is very wrong with the world and we need a Savior to save us from our sin and all its effects, including loneliness. God wants to meet you at the corner of your loneliness. Because loneliness can leave our hearts raw and exposed (though we fight hard not to let others see that), it can also leave our hearts more open and ready to draw near to God. As I look back over my lives, many of the times that I felt the Lord's presence most intimately in my own heart haven't been the times when everything was going great; they've been times of sadness and loneliness. I came to Christ as a 14 year old in part because I was in a new school, had no friends, and felt very lonely. Over the years I can remember many long walks on rainy nights talking to God. There was a sense of loneliness, of rawness, but in that loneliness there was also a sense of fellowship with the Lord.

Loneliness can be a unique place of fellowship with the Lord because so much of the busyness and shallowness of life is stripped away and in the pain of loneliness our hearts are able to sense the loving presence of the Lord. When you struggle with loneliness, remember that God wants to meet you in that loneliness in order to draw your heart to Him. Rather than fighting it, what if you surrendered it to God? Paul Mathies offers this suggestion about loneliness:

"If you're lonely, have you ever thought about coming to God and offering it to him as a gift in worship? In saying, 'I've tried everything to fix it, and I can't. I've tried filling it with the world. I've tried filling it with people. I've tried seeking you. I don't know what to do with it. So I'm just going to offer it up to you. Can you take this ugly thing and make it something beautiful?'"

There is a temptation in loneliness to feel sorry for ourselves, to wallow in self-pity, and there can be a strange enjoyment in indulging that, but pitying ourselves blocks our hearts from drawing near to God. We can't turn inward and look upward at the same time. What I believe God urges us to do is to surrender that loneliness to Him, to accept that we can't change it – at least not the root of it – and draw near to Jesus, asking him to "take it and make something beautiful out of it." God meets us in our loneliness in order to draw our hearts to Christ.

III. God wants to meet us in our loneliness to provide us a way out of it

While God does want to meet us in our loneliness to draw us near to Christ, that's not all He wants to do. We don't want to over-spiritualize this and say, "all we need is God." God knows that we also need human companionship. He created us that way. He walked closely with Adam but He saw that Adam needed human companionship or he would be alone. Adam needed Eve and God provided for that need. Psalm 68 also tells us that God wants to provide a very practical way out of loneliness for those who are struggling with loneliness:

A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling.⁶ God sets the lonely in families, he leads out the prisoners with singing; but the rebellious live in a sun-scorched land. Psalm 68:5-6

This is a list of people who are underdogs in society and they have a significant need, a significant gap, in their lives and God meets them right where they are and with what they need most. To those who have no father in this world God is a father. To the widow who, in that culture, had no one to defend her, God is her defense. And God sets the lonely in families – in other words, He provides a place, a people, for the lonely to belong to.

Loneliness is a sense of isolation, of relational disconnectedness of any depth or meaning, but God comes into that loneliness with a message of hope: He will love us where we are and at the same time help us to get out of our loneliness. He will provide opportunities for relationships in our lives and give us practical steps that we can take to build relational bridges to others. As we step out in faith, trusting God to help us, we will see His provision for our loneliness to end. There are many practical provisions and steps that God might lead us to take in order to deal with loneliness, but one thing we should do is:

Fight for relational connectedness. Fight for community.

Living in community is hard, because we are all sinners and sin fragments relationships. Whether it be in marriage, or children, or friends, or church family, or co-workers, there are challenges. It doesn't come easy. The only place where deep, fun, and lively relationships occur easily are in beer commercials. All you need to do is hang out with other people who drink Coors Light and laughter and sharing life comes easily. But in real life it takes work. Fight for it. Take steps to deepen relationships. Invite people over, and don't expect to feel close to them on a first time visit. It takes time. Walls need to come down, becoming comfortable with each other doesn't usually happen immediately. But we need to resist the urge to give up and withdraw.

When I was working at Volvo as a car salesman, I remember we went through a really slow time and there were weeks where there were very few customers. It was really discouraging. They had this large screen TV in the lunchroom and it was turned on to the news and it was the time when the 2000 election results were being questioned and everyone was counting hanging chads and all that. Anyway, I noticed that, because I wasn't seeing many customers and instead was just hanging out watching the news, that I was losing motivation to work to get customers. When someone would come in and say, Allen, there're customers on the floor and you're up, I'd feel this drag, like "oh man, I don't want to deal with them. Probably won't buy a car anyway." On the opposite end of the spectrum, when things were hopping and I had a lot of customers I always had energy for more customers.

Now I want to respect the different ways we process people, but there is an overriding principle here: if we withdraw from people, if we pull back in isolation and find the TV is better company, or not making the effort is easier, it will get easier and easier to stay in that place and yet our loneliness and isolation will deepen, and we will also grow more and more self-centered and self-focused. Fight for community.

There is no one way to do that. Have you considered connecting with 3 or 4 people in the church for a discipleship group? Are you attending a community group? Are you inviting people over to your house –

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even just for coffee and dessert? Are you trying to be real with people in your life? Are you looking out for ways to love them and care for them?

God not only wants to meet us in our loneliness and provide a way out, He also wants to use us to help reach out to the lonely among us. To be a friend, to show them that we care, to provide a people, a place for them to belong too. Loneliness is a two way street – God wants to meet you at the corner of your loneliness, and He wants to use you to meet others at the corner of their loneliness. Let's ask God to pour out His Spirit on us that we might always be a church where the grace and love of God flows – a place where it is safe to be real, and for relationships to develop and deepen. And most of all, that in those relationships, we are always point each other to Christ and growing together in our knowledge of and love for the Savior. Let's pray.

Possible closer: His Forever