

“Alone Together”

June 28, 2020

Unafraid series - Livestream

It was mid-March when we first heard or saw a new social media hashtag appear - #alonetogether. At that moment, it was an ad campaign to encourage physical distancing as we began living into the reality of Covid-19. The message was: *Stay home. Stay calm. Stay connected. Stay active.*

And the reality hit – hard. Alone together - worshipping together online, yet not physically gathered in a sanctuary. Going to school online without a built-in social structure and daily, face-to-face conversation. Working online and interacting through video meetings for some, being laid off for others, and still for others continuing to work as usual. Connecting with loved ones in every way except in-person – phone calls, texts, video calls, even written letters!

Take a look at this image designed by the United Nations in response to what we were facing due to Covid-19. **SHOW SLIDE** This is what it was like for many around the world, especially as families have been hesitant to gather together. No hugs or touch has been a difficult part of this time; I’ve heard that from more than one person.

These past few months have also challenged us in our times of being alone. I’ve found moments when I’ve had to deal with my feelings – including fears and anxieties. There’s no distraction or diversion. There’s no busy schedule to fall back on and avoid what we don’t want to deal with.

All of this comes as we hear more and more about the epidemic of loneliness. It’s not new news, even before Covid-19. We’re more connected than ever before through technology and social media, but also more lonely. That goes for all ages. We sometimes think it’s just young people, but it’s also those in middle age and older. Some have called loneliness a health crisis.

It’s a fascinating phenomenon, but also a really important topic to address because it can create fear in us. We’ve heard it in this series - fear is a powerful motivator for both action and inaction – sometimes doing more harm than good. And that’s no different with loneliness. We need courage and hope to face it well.

So first, an important distinction – the difference between being alone (or having times of solitude) and being lonely. Jesus sought out solitude - being alone with God, spending time in prayer, perhaps looking inside of himself, and sharing with God. If you’re more introverted, being alone is really vital for you. That’s where you get your energy. You need time alone to recharge. For those of us who are more extroverted,

time with others is vital. That's where we gain energy. Either way, we all need some time alone – in solitude – and we need time with others.

We're created for relationship with God and each other – and it's vital to remember even as we're still physical distancing. In the beginning, God created, and you know may know Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling masterpiece *The Creation of Adam*, but take a look at what some people may feel like in this altered version. **SHOW SLIDE** No touching or closeness.

Even though we know that God created and God is with us, we can forget that we're created for relationship with God and with each other. Perhaps we're not all married or partnered, but we all need human connection. We know the importance of human connection and how it can be a blessing when we have security, stability, and love. We may know personal pain or at least we're aware of the pain when human connection is absent or abusive, when there's rejection and neglect. Our early attachments (or lack of attachments) have a powerful impact on how we engage in relationships from the beginning and throughout our lives.

So being alone is one thing, but loneliness is different. Andrea Cope writes, "Being alone is a state of *being*; loneliness is a state of *mind*." Loneliness is a reflection of whether or not we feel connected to others. It's that sense of sadness that comes from feeling social isolation. We can feel lonely when we're physically alone - or when we're in a crowd of people.

We also need to admit that loneliness is common among us. Some of us might feel loneliness more than others, but we've all felt it sometime. It's not abnormal, though we may struggle with the shame of admitting that we feel it. We yearn for connection, and it's tough to admit that we feel lonely, excluded, or left out.

Throughout Scripture, we hear our faith ancestors express loneliness. The psalmists ask God to be near because they are lonely. Jesus had moments of feeling fear and loneliness - especially on the cross – feeling forsaken.

In a documentary called "The Age of Loneliness," Sue Bourne says, "'Lonely' hits a spot of fear in all of us even if we don't acknowledge it." Dr. Vivek Murthy, former U.S. Surgeon General, found many people struggling with a lack of human connection when he did a listening tour of the country during his time of service. And that sense of loneliness affected more than just mental health – it brought on physical health concerns, too.

We read about the importance of human connection from Ecclesiastes, which is a book of wisdom literature. It probes our human condition and tackles a lot of questions about like the meaning of life. But this part in chapter 4 is clear that relationships make a difference and bring meaning to our lives.

We need people to enjoy life with - family and friends. We need people who can offer help when we need it. When we work together, there's greater reward than working alone. Sharing with each other is a blessing, especially when times are hard. Taking care of each other matters; there's strength in numbers when it comes to the basics like staying warm, finding shelter, and protecting each other from harm. We need strength and support to get through life – even to resist temptation. There's not as much meaning in our work and life when we we're not connected to others.

Ecclesiastes reminds us that friendship – knowing that we have people around us - is a key to live with courage and hope. If we struggle with loneliness, it's easy to withdraw and isolate ourselves from others, but that's the worst thing we can do. We need to let others in when we're lonely. And we need to pay attention when others reach out to us.

We need to be intentional about reaching out when we feel lonely or someone else may feel lonely in a more pointed way. Grief is one of those times when it's easy for people to feel lonely – like no one cares or understands, like life goes on without anyone remembering the loss. That's a common sharing in our GriefShare group – that it feels like the world keeps turning as we grieve losses.

Caregiving is another experience when loneliness can be a difficult reality. Those who are caregivers for others may struggle with loneliness because it's demanding and difficult to find time away from their responsibilities. It's hard to ask for help and to admit that we struggle with loneliness.

What can we do if we're feeling lonely? Have courage and reach out. Don't isolate yourself from others, but turn to trusted friends who can offer empathy and help you pull out from that shell of isolation. Seeking professional help may be another need, and there's no shame in asking for help.

Turning to God is another way that we can stay connected. Hearing the words from Psalm 139 is that reminder that God knows us intimately, and God cares about us deeply. God is present; there's no place God isn't with us – no height, depth, distance, or time of day or night.

Investing in relationships can help, including focusing on those around us who are lonely. Taking the time to call, send a card, and perhaps visit can help us to recognize the connections we have. Staying connected to a faith community offers ongoing connection and opportunities to serve. And I've seen the power of that throughout years in ministry, especially over these past few months.

It's important that we don't indulge when we feel lonely – whether it's food, shopping, substances, or unhealthy media. Trying to fill a void of relationships with

something that ultimately will not satisfy us brings more pain and potential for greater harm to ourselves and others.

Maybe most important is our attitude. It's so easy to adopt a defeated attitude – that no one cares and no one understands. It's a really quick way to deplete our hope and magnify our problems – not that we don't struggle – but we won't be able to see anything more than the problem. It can be difficult to look beyond our struggles and claim God's presence, remember God's steadfast love, and see God's vision for us, and yet faith helps us to do just that – trusting that there's hope beyond what we feel in the moment.

John Amodeo writes, "Loneliness is nothing to be ashamed of. It is part of the human condition. But the solution isn't simply to surround ourselves with people; we need to look in the right place. It's heartening that research is confirming the obvious— that the best antidote to loneliness is developing an interpersonal life nourished by qualities that include empathy, compassion, and caring about others."

We're called to be a community grounded in the love of Jesus Christ. That means that we offer one another God's love. We walk with each other on the journey. That doesn't change no matter what's happening around us. It might look very different, but the call to care about each other doesn't stop. In fact, it's more needed than ever, and so many of you have offered that to others in this very different and sometimes difficult time. And if you're not sure if it matters, please know that it does. I've heard from so many people how a text, a card, and a call has helped them feel connected and less lonely.

As we pray today, if you're lonely, offer that to God. Rest in God's care for you and consider the people you trust to call on for help. If while we pray, a person comes to mind who might need your care, consider that a nudge from the Holy Spirit to reach out and check in.

May God help us to know the strength of our connections and the gift of our community. Thanks be to God. AMEN.

PRAYERS of the PEOPLE & the LORD'S PRAYER