

Outsiders as the Lonely Among Us

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Luke 7:11-17

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Grand Rapids MI

About five years ago I heard a report out of England, that at the time, I found quite interesting and humorous. The title of the article was "The U.K. now has a Minister of Loneliness" from NPR. The title made me chuckle because the title sounded humorous to me at the time. Minister of Loneliness. But as I listened more closely to the report and considered the health impacts that loneliness has on individuals, especially people who are facing economic struggles, health barriers or the loss of significant others. I appreciated England taking it seriously enough to launch this new office to combat loneliness as a public health issue.

According to government figures in the report, more than 9 million people in the U.K. "always or often feel lonely" and "around 200,000 older people have not had a conversation with a friend or relative in more than a month."

In 2017 those were some staggering figures and it raised my awareness and need to address the issues related to loneliness. Here in the US it is not much better. Before the pandemic, according to the National Poll on Health and Aging, one in three adults in the U.S. ages 50 to 80 lacked regular companionship, and 43% of community-dwelling older adults self-reported feeling lonely according to the Global Health Research and Policy report. These figures worsened dramatically as the pandemic has dragged on. Many of us know of friends and loved ones who were nearly cut off from all outside contact for months at a time, due to COVID. I have heard from several people say to me that it had been 6 months, a year and even two years since they visited an elderly family member or traveled home to see friends. Sometimes trying to keep them safe from COVID actually made matters worse. I know I struggled more with

depression and anxiety when I was more isolated. Today we realize there is a balance and often a trade off between staying isolated and safe and interacting with others facing a higher sense of risk of possibly getting COVID.

Because of COVID we are all more keenly aware of the impact that prolonged isolation and lack of human contact has on people of all ages, especially our elderly. Still today we have several of our eldest members who are avoiding outside contact with others out of concern for COVID infection. We are still averaging 25- 50 viewers on YouTube each week. A mix of people at the cottage, people who view from home and people checking us out before attending. So I invite you to turn around a wave at the camera – remember that some of the people we miss on Sunday are here still virtually.

So let us consider the silent outsider the lonely person among us, neighbors, old friends, relatives and members of our church. Let's start with a definition. What do we mean by loneliness? *Loneliness is a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship, which happens when there is a mismatch between the quantity and quality of the social relationships that we have, and those that we want.* (Perlman and Peplau, 1981)

Loneliness also takes on different forms like Emotional Loneliness with the loss of a companion. Social Loneliness when you don't have or have lost your social network of friends. Or Existential Loneliness which is a universal form of the human condition which expresses the separateness of one from society. It can also be from occasional to chronic especially around difficult times of the year when the sense of loneliness is acute.

So here are some things that contribute to loneliness at any age:

- Being socially isolated or having no family or friends
- Being single, divorced or separated
- Living alone

- Being aged 75+
- Poor health
- Developing or living with a life-limiting illness or disability
- Living with a mental health condition
- Living on a low income- poverty

Transitions in life that can contribute to loneliness

- Bereavement, becoming widowed
- Retirement
- Geographical relocation
- Living in a residential care home
- Becoming a caregiver
- Loss of mobility
- Sensory loss – like hearing or vision
- Giving up driving

To name a few. Young people also face various factors that differ from these.

Loneliness coupled with depression can make these issues difficult to overcome alone. So as a community of faith it should be part of our ministry to reach out to others and relieve loneliness when possible. It may be offering activities and inviting people to join in. It may be offering a Visitation ministry within the congregation with volunteers to visit and call upon absent members. It could even be an outreach of the church to offer activities designed to reach neighbors with social activities they are eager to attend. I am glad we have three outside groups using our building already that are specifically targeting older adults. Bridge, Golden Kiwanis and the Women's City Club.

Loneliness is the silent Outsider because so often don't realize someone has become an outsider of sorts, because of isolation and prolonged absence. In our Gospel reading we see Jesus intentionally reach out and restore the dead son to his mother. We don't know exactly why Jesus was moved to do this miracle but one could argue that he was moved by compassion for the widowed mother who most likely was now alone without a husband or son to care for her. Some scholars speculate that Jesus was moved by the funeral procession because he recognized how his own death soon

would make his mother a widow too. We also know that in John's Gospel, John is commanded to care for Mary as his own as Jesus hung on the cross. Another act to provide for a widow, his own mother. Since the creation story we know that we are all called into relationship with one another and with God. We are designed to be social creatures and when that is not possible we can be negatively impacted by it.

Deuteronomy 10:17-19 "For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." This passage shows that God watches over and cares for these three groups because they are without family support in the land.

For us here at East Church let us each be proactive in reaching out to relieve loneliness among others and ourselves. If you have an idea for an event or ongoing activity with others, let's find a way to support doing it. Check out events coming up and invite someone you suspect would benefit getting out of the house. Or are you missing someone here at church. Pick up the phone and talk to them, Drop off a small gift or drop by and sit outside one cooler evening and catch up. There are so many great ways to share the love of Christ with others who feel left out, forgotten or seeking a place to make friends at any age. Let us be like Jesus and not wait to be asked, but step up and spend a little time with one another. Human interaction is good medicine.