Sunday, November 23, 1975
HOW TO OVERCOME LONELINESS
Mark 1:35-38

"Do you know what you're going to be when you grow up?" says a character in a Peanuts comic strip. "Lonesome," is the reply.

That answer is only partially correct, for the fact is that all human beings are lonely at one time or another and it's not only when we grow up.

The contemporary world has accelerated the universal loneliness of human beings. While we have more people, we do not have less loneliness. Personal isolation is becoming a major social fact of our time. A great many people are disturbed by the feeling that they are rootless or increasingly anonymous. The manifestations of loneliness are all around us.

Drinking too much? That may be your way of attempting to combat loneliness. Eating compulsively? In a book entitled, "The Importance of Overweight," the author says that this may have a double purpose: to ward of loneliness and to strike back at those whom you blame for it.

Do you talk all the time? You're lonely. Do you work or play at a furious pace? You're lonely. The greatest fear of the infant and the small child is separation from. its mother. But this separation anxiety, the fear of being left alone, erupts in all of us at times.

Each stage in life has its own capacity to bring on loneliness. We often think of childhood as a time of innocence and thus we think of children as the happiest of creatures and childhood as a time without loneliness. Not so! Each stage in life has its own peculiar kind of loneliness.

The younger child has his, as does the older child and certainly the infamous middle child. You might have felt loneliness as a child when your classmates laughed at you because you were cross-eyed or as a teenager when you were the last one to be chosen for a team, or when you did not get an invitation to the school dance.

The young adult knows a different kind. of loneliness and adulthood can be terrifyingly lonely. Practically every human being can recall times when he or she has experienced that strange inner gnawing, that mental hunger, that unsettling unrest that makes us say, "I feel lonely."

There are persons who don't look lonely, who seem to have gone beyond it. The person who seems to have so much going for him or her — money, looks, education, contacts, we might never guess to be lonely. Yet some of the most vibrant and cheerful people are acutely lonely.

The condition of being lonely is neither good nor bad in itself. It is a neutral reality that can be used and handled so as to give life a new aliveness and depth, or it can render life desolate and empty.

To understand loneliness, we have to begin with the fact that it is the expression of the truth that we are individuals and each one of us unique. Human aloneness is a part of our gift of uniqueness and therefore to some degree is to be cherished and cultivated. If we seek to escape completely from our aloneness, soon become separated from ourselves and we lose our individuality and the mystery of our personhood.

Yet most of us make the mistake of trying to overcome our loneliness by escaping it and this leaves our lives empty. In so doing we are really trying to escape ourselves.

We have already alluded to some methods of escaping loneliness — over-eating, alcohol, pills, and other drugs. Pornography and its popularity are a sign of the amount of loneliness in our society. It is intimacy for sale, although false degrading intimacy.

Another attempted escape from loneliness is conformity. Middle-agers as well as teen-agers often try to shake their loneliness by conforming to a given group. Secretly or unconsciously the person is thinking, “If I conform and do what they want me to do, they’ll like me.” The hope is that in looking like, sounding like, and acting like the group, one will find acceptance and belonging that will over-power his or her loneliness.

Such attempts at dealing with our loneliness offer only superficial relief. It may be a way of being around more people. It may get us more invitations to social gatherings, but all of us know that a person can be terribly lonely in a crowd. Nothing is lonelier than being at a party where you feel you don’t belong. Furthermore, conforming to others creates the peculiar loneliness of separating one from oneself.

The person who takes all of his or her cues from a group forsakes himself and becomes a collection of the expectations of others. The self is lost. Without integrity and centeredness, a person becomes a hollow shell. In trying to be liked by others, a person sacrifices the possibility of developing inner strength and direction that would give him or her a base for building strong relationships with others. Many times, when we say “no” to others, we are also saying “yes” to ourselves.

Some people try to use power to overcome loneliness. The person falsely thinks — “I’ll be safe if I control everything.”

But the roots of loneliness are very deep and cannot be touched by optimistic advertisement, substitute love images, or social togetherness or drugs or conformity or power. And some of the basic root of loneliness should not be destroyed but cultivated. More about that in a moment.

In an attempt to overcome our loneliness, the most inviting temptation of all is to expect that we can get rid of our loneliness in our relationships with other persons. Naturally, we all need and desire close friends and companions and they are very necessary for life. But to expect that such friendship, or even the intimacy of marriage will take away all loneliness is expecting too much of purely human relationships.

One writer put it this way: “To wait for moments or places where no pain exists, no separation is felt and where all human restlessness has turned into inner peace is waiting for a dream world. No friend, or lover, no husband or wife, no community or commune will be able to put to rest our deepest cravings for unity and wholeness.”

Furthermore, by burdening others with these divine expectations, we may actually prevent the expression of a deep and free friendship and love. No one person or group can completely satisfy our deepest longings and desires. Friendship and love cannot develop in the form of an anxious clinging to each other.

Often marriages fail or they are not what they should be because one or the other of the marriage partners expects the other to provide all the emotional support and strength. And no human being can completely do this for another.

So, it is sad to see how sometimes people suffering from loneliness, often deepened by the lack of affection in their intimate family circle, search for a final solution for their loneliness and look at a new friend, a new lover, or a new community with messianic expectations. They keep thinking, “Maybe this time I have found what I’ve been searching for.” But they have only been running from themselves.

What then is the answer to our handling and using our loneliness?

The first part of the answer is to accept our aloneness, our individuality, our uniqueness. our loneliness and not try to escape it. By accepting our loneliness and exploring it, we are in reality accepting ourselves.

We even need to seek aloneness. Jesus knew this and that’s why he made it a regular practice to go out to a lonely place and pray, as our text points out.

So instead of trying to escape from our loneliness, we need to first go inside of it, protect it, and through it come to know ourselves better. “We must first find the courage to enter into the desert of our loneliness and change it by gentle and persistent effort into a garden of solitude.”

Our basic loneliness which comes from our individuality and uniqueness is hiding unknown beauty and mystery. Rather than always fighting loneliness, we need to take time to be alone. Unfortunately, solitude is almost an. extinct word in modern society. Wanting to be alone with one’s thoughts or dreams is considered almost antisocial.

But a certain amount of solitude is necessary for our spiritual and even our physical wellbeing. Being alone can be a healing time when we are bruised and fatigued from too much contact with other personalities.

Part of the problem with our loneliness is that we’re not used to being alone. If there are not people around there is usually noise or words. It starts very early. The average child watches 25,000 TV commercials a year; 25,000 reinforcements for sugar-coated Popsy Flakes, Captain Goo and many other things. It’s a tribute to the human mind that the child can still talk and read, and you can see why he or she will have his transistor radio clamped to his ear in Yellowstone Park.

And so much of the noise around us is distorted and de-signed to keep us off balance. The TV commercials are a cliche, but there they are — reminding us over and over again that we are not okay, our floors-don’t shine, our coffee tastes lousy, we are exuding odors from fourteen parts of our bodies and if we don’t take the right pills, we’re going to be up all night and our stomach’s going to feel a drip, drip and churn.

So, the first step in overcoming loneliness is to be alone at times and to be silent. We need to move from the restless senses to the restful Spirit. Listen attentively to your own struggle. Listen to yourself in silence. Find yourself — then you will also be on the way to finding others and to finding God.

The second part of the answer to our loneliness is really part of what we have just said. When we are alone, then we are to listen not only to ourselves, but to God. One of the purposes of prayer is aloneness with God. Be silent, pay attention to your thoughts. Where are they leading you? Do not worry if your mind wanders. Where it wanders may be precisely what you need to pray about the most, and in its wanderings, you are already praying.

Through such movements as Transcendental Meditation, people are often experiencing their own aloneness and with-it God. From that kind of silence comes amazing strength.

A third part of the answer to our loneliness comes from being with others who care about us and about whom we care. Being alone readies us for being with others. When we have experienced ourselves in aloneness and have a strong center within ourselves then we bring strength to any relationship with another person and that adds to the relationship and its power. We will then also experience God in our being with others.

Once we have experienced ourselves and have come to accept ourselves and not tried to run away, then we will be on the way in dealing with our loneliness. We will also begin to experience God and other people in a fresh way, not because we demand something from them, but simply'because we enjoy being with them.

We will also come to know that the only final answer to all loneliness is rooted and grounded in the Eternal, in God himself. The final answer to our loneliness is the knowledge and faith that nothing can separate us

The Psalmist knew this when he wrote:

Where can I escape from your spirit?
Where can I £1ee from your presence?
If I climb up to heaven, you are there.
If I make my bed in hell, you are there.
If I take my flight to the frontiers of the morning, or dwell at the limit of the western sea, even there your hand will meet me.

There is no place where God is not. Even when we experience God's absence, God is present. We are not alone!