Sunday, March 12, 1989
THE CROSS OF JESUS: THE ANSWER TO LONELINESS (No. 5 in a Sermon Series)
Mark 1:35-38, 15:33-34

Our world is filled with lonely, desperate people. Here are three examples from a number of anonymous notes I have received over the years:

A mother wrote: “You don’t know me, but my daughters and I have problems. We just moved here from out of town. My oldest is on probation. She refuses to go to school. She wishes to return where we came from to stay with her grandmother. My oldest two are very jealous of each other. My second oldest is seven months pregnant. My youngest is very hostile and upset over all our arguments. Maybe if strangers pray for us, I can keep my girls together. I am seriously thinking of suicide as I have no desire to live.”

Another person wrote: “Help me to heal and not to hate because of the affair. Pray hard. I’m desperate.”

And yet another wrote: “Sometimes I feel like I just can’t go on, and I don’t think I can stand the pressure of another day. Would you please remember me in your prayers and those like me? Is it possible to die from loneliness and a broken heart?”

Loneliness is all around us. The contemporary world seems to have accelerated the universal loneliness of human beings. Although there are more people in the world and more of us live in the cities and towns, loneliness, personal isolation, and anonymity — all are on the increase.

Do you drink too much? That may be your way of attempting to combat loneliness. Do you eat compulsively? Maybe it’s your loneliness. Do you talk all the time? Maybe it’s because you’re lonely. Do you work or play at a furious pace? Perhaps you are fighting loneliness.

Are you afraid of being alone — afraid of long periods of silence? It could be the fear of loneliness.

Each stage of life has its own capacity to bring on loneliness. 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.

Is there anyone here, or who is listening on the radio or watching on television, who has not experienced that strange inner gnawing, that mental hunger, that unsettling unrest that makes us say, “I feel lonely"?

There are individuals 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 outwardly 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.

Before we look more specifically at how the cross of Jesus is the answer to loneliness, let's look more deeply at what loneliness is and how it comes about.

To understand loneliness, we need to begin with the fact that it is the expression of the truth that even though we are all connected to each other, we are at the same time individuals, and each one of us is 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, we soon become separated from ourselves, and we lose our individuality and the mystery of our personhood.

Thus, too many of us make the mistake of trying to overcome our loneliness by escaping it, by running from it, and this leaves our lives empty. In so doing, we are really trying to escape from ourselves.

I have already mentioned some of the ways we try to escape loneliness — alcohol abuse, compulsive eating, and the use of other kinds of drugs. Pornography and its popularity is a sign of the amount of loneliness in our society. It is intimacy for sale, although false, degrading intimacy.

Another very common way to attempt to escape from loneliness is conformity. Middle-agers, as well as teenagers, frequently 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; if I try my best to be the same as they are, they'll like me." It's also a way of hiding in the crowd — conform, and then your individuality, your uniqueness is covered up. The hope is that in looking the same, sounding the same, and acting the same, you will find acceptance and belonging that will overpower the feeling of loneliness.

Unfortunately, conforming for the sake of conformity creates the peculiar loneliness of separating one from oneself. Those who take all of their cues from a group forsake themselves and become a collection of the expectations of others. The self is lost. Without integrity and centeredness, a person becomes a hollow shell. If you are always trying to be the same as others, then you sacrifice the possibility of developing inner strength and direction that can give you a base for building strong relationships with others.

There are also those who 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, social togetherness, drugs, conformity, or power.

In attempting to overcome our loneliness, the most inviting temptation of all is to expect that we can be totally rid of our loneliness through our relationships with other persons. To be sure, we all need and desire close friends and companions, and they are necessary for life. In the creation story in the book of Genesis, we are told that God saw that it is not good for human beings to be all alone — so God created male and female for each other. Throughout history, people have lived in groups, tribes, villages, and cities.

But to expect friendship or marriage, no matter how intimate, to take away all loneliness is expecting too much from 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 wife or husband, 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 because we put too much pressure on the relationship. No one person or group can completely satisfy our deepest longings or desires.

Sometimes 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 that he or she needs. No human being can completely do this for another. To put it another way, no human being can be God for another.

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, a new husband or wife, 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 and from God. The only ultimate answer to our loneliness is a sense of the presence of God. Years ago, St. Augustine wrote, “Thou hast made us for thyself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.”

What then can we learn from Jesus as an answer to our loneliness?

Accept our aloneness. The first part of the answer is to accept our aloneness, our individuality, our uniqueness, our loneliness, and not try to escape it. That’s precisely what Jesus did. By accepting our loneliness and exploring it, we are in reality accepting ourselves.

More than that, we even need to seek aloneness in our lives. Jesus knew this, and that’s why He made it a regular practice to go out to a lonely place and pray, as the Gospel of Mark reminded us in the first part of our scripture reading.

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. Through it, we will ultimately come to know God more intimately. Henri Nouwen wrote: “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 anti-social.

But a certain amount of solitude is necessary for our spiritual and even our physical well-being. 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. I see many people taking a walk alone, but they have a radio or tape player attached to their belt with earphones. I see young people who cannot go anywhere without their tape player or radio going full blast. Why do we have so much trouble with silence?

The first step in overcoming loneliness is to learn to be alone and to not be afraid of silence in our aloneness. 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. Do not be afraid to be alone with yourself. Then you will be on the way to experiencing the presence of God. Some of us have so much noise in our lives that there is no room to sense the presence of God.

A sense of the presence of God. This leads us directly to Jesus on the cross and His aloneness there, and how His suffering is an answer to our loneliness. At one point, while suffering and dying, He cried out, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

Jesus was not afraid to express His loneliness, His agony, His feeling of being forsaken. Oftentimes, it is only in our experience of being abandoned by God, or when God seems far away, that we come finally to a deeper experience of the presence of God. When we admit that we are completely empty, then we are ready to be filled with God’s presence and peace.

Not too many years ago, Martin Luther King, Jr. was about two weeks into the bus boycott that he had helped organize in Montgomery, Alabama, and he had been asked to be its public leader. He was receiving phone calls threatening him and his family daily. Finally, he received a call at midnight that said, “If you aren’t out of town in three days, we’re going to blow your brains out and blow up your house.” King said that he never felt more alone. Listen to his words:

“I sat there and thought about a beautiful little daughter who had just been born... I started thinking about a dedicated and loyal wife, who was over there asleep. And I discovered that religion had to become real to me, and I had to know God for myself. And I bowed down over that cup of coffee. I will never forget it... I prayed a prayer and I prayed out loud that night... I’m faltering. I’m losing courage. And I can’t let the people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak. And it seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me: Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And so, I will be with you, even until the end of the world. God promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No, never alone.”

The Good News of our faith is that God is most deeply with us, most present within us, when we are feeling most “Godforsaken.”

Christ redeems our relationships. Thirdly, the cross of Jesus is the answer to loneliness because in that death and resurrection, God is continually redeeming our imperfect, broken human relationships. Christ is breaking down the barriers that keep people apart. “In Christ, there is no east or west, in Him no south or north, but one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth.”

This eternal, unearned, freely given love of God as seen in Jesus, especially in His suffering, death, and resurrection, is the final answer to all loneliness. It is our faith that nothing can separate us ever from the love of God. Amen.