

Oregon City United Methodist Church
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Series: Simon and Garfunkel

Sermon: Sounds of Silence - Loneliness

Psalm 69:1-3, 20

Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold. I have come into the deep waters; the floods engulf me. I am worn out calling for help; my throat is parched. My eyes fail, looking for my God.

Scorn has broken my heart and has left me helpless; I looked for sympathy, but there was none, for comforters, but I found none.

Psalm 73:23-28

Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you. But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds.

Sermon

One summer 25 years ago, in 1990, I got a small side job in a neighboring county helping out an older couple. They needed someone up in the rafters of their old house to clean out all of the old and gross insulation in their old house. They could pay for the new insulation to blow into the attic, but the company was going to charge an arm and a leg to remove the old. So they got me, a \$4 an hour high school kid, and boxes of hefty trash bags for me to fill. Just know, this is in a Nebraska July where the temp in the rafters would exceed 110 - there might be asbestos, so they got me a paper mask. And the house was supposedly haunted. According to local legend, if you're outside in the lawn, and look up into a second story window, you can sometimes see the apparition of a little boy looking down at you. Did I mention that the house looked a little like the Amityville Horror house? See, here's the Amityville Horror house: And I found on Google Earth the house I was working in. And the older couple would be gone most of the day during the week I was to work. Just me. Alone. In a sweltering attic. Removing bags full of carcinogens, In a haunted house. Not worth \$4 an hour. I had borrowed my dad's pickup for the job and a boom box for tunes. The radio, I found out, didn't work in the boom box, but there was a cassette tape inside. Simon and Garfunkel's greatest hits. My dad's tape. But I needed something noisy and loud in that job, or every little sound was going to freak me out. So all week, I was introduced to Simon and Garfunkel, blaring from the boom box so I didn't feel alone.

In 1965, fifty years ago, Simon and Garfunkel released their first album that featured Sound of Silence. It was that song that got Columbia Records to sign them on. The album flopped, and Simon and Garfunkel broke up. That spring, however, radio stations played the song Sounds of Silence over Spring break, and it took off, hitting #1 later that year. Simon and Garfunkel decided to get back together, and put out a hastily recorded second album, entitled, Sounds of Silence, trying to capitalize on their one hit. They stayed together a few more years, but their friendship was never really a friendship. Even today, their relationship is rocky and complicated. But for whatever reason, the song Sounds of Silence has remained popular. The imagery is timeless. Hello darkness, my old friend. People talking without speaking, People hearing without listening, Silence like a cancer grows. There are many interpretations one can find, but the pain of loneliness is overwhelming. The song screams out the need to be heard, the need to be wanted, the need to belong. But finding only the sounds

of silence.

Loneliness is a common human experience and many of us struggle with this topic called loneliness. The statistics show that one in five people suffer from chronic loneliness, and up to a third of the population feels lonely a lot of the time, yet on TV, in magazines and online, almost no one seems to be affected. Why is this? Why is there such a mismatch between the reality of long-term loneliness and the silence that surrounds the subject? We can talk about depression, anorexia, even bipolar disorder, but loneliness is a strange affliction that's never mentioned. There are a variety of ways that loneliness comes upon us. Loneliness of fear, of being afraid of being angry. Have any of you ever lost your temper and been so embarrassed that you felt alone in the room and just ashamed that you just blew up? There's the loneliness of divorce, of loss...whether your job or your home or a loved one... the loneliness of death, of grief, of rejection, of traveling, of being new. Anybody ever been the new guy or gal? All of us. The loneliness of following Christ in the face of conflict, the loneliness of widowhood, of being single, of loveless marriages, of isolation in dating, of being alone at home, of spiritual wilderness, of choosing purity. Have any of you ever chosen the road to purity and felt like you where the only person in America that desires to be pure? Loneliness of being misunderstood, of leadership, of being a stay at home parent. I came up with this one after having a conversation with a lady. I called the lady and said, "how are you?" And she said, "Thank God you called. This is the first conversation I've had with someone older than a two year old. So, we talked about something other than "Baby Einstein." She was appreciative. Loneliness of the party lifestyle. Maybe you're in this party lifestyle where you have these big explosive parties, but then you come home and you feel alone and empty - Wayne Straight, I'm talking to you! Loneliness happens. The Bible is filled with lonely people. The Bible starts off by saying, "It's not good for man to be alone." Adam was lonely. Cain felt alone. Moses was lonely. Some, if not all, of the prophets speak about being lonely. King David was lonely. Some could read the gospels and believe that at times, Jesus must have been lonely. Our Scripture today surely comes from a lonely heart. I looked for sympathy, but there was none, for comforters, but I found none.

How does one fight loneliness? I'm not an expert psychologist, , but I do know a few things. I know a few ways that don't work, and few ways that might help. First, the wrong ways to fight loneliness.

First wrong way: Just be around people and you'll be OK. Just get out there, and you'll be fine. Bzz. Wrong answer. Loneliness isn't about the quantity of relationships, it's about quality of relationships. Quality, not quantity. One of the loneliest souls I know has 700 friends on facebook, but feels like he has an empty life. It's possible for two people to be stuck on a desert island and not feel lonely, and it's possible for one person to hang around 1,000 people and feel all alone. I'm an introvert, I crave my alone time, but I also have to feel connected. You cannot medicate your loneliness by being in high population areas. I remember sitting in hotel room in Dallas - away from family (this was right before cell phones). I'd be there all week - no car. Trainings in the day, but at night, just me. With a tv with 3 channels. One night, I had to do something. Hopped on the bus, didn't care where it went. Just to be around people. Got off downtown Dallas. Went to a restaurant. Table by myself. Now I'm lonely and spending money. Didn't help. It's taken me a long time, but I finally think I understand the proverb, wherever you go, there you are. We can't escape our feelings by changing our environment. We have to change ourselves. Loneliness has nothing to do with the number of people around you. According to some studies, there are more lonely people who are married than who are single.

Second wrong way to fix loneliness: Try to recreate your past. Try to relive your past. Many times when we find ourselves lonely, we retreat to the past. Things are never as you remember them after the lapse of several years. You may reminisce about the past, but you can never recapture it. Try as you might to go back, to recreate old situations and reconstruct the old environment, you are doomed to disappointment. Ever drive by your old high school, your old house? It might be fun to do that, but sometimes we do that kind of thing trying to reconnect to an old feeling, an old life. It doesn't last. I see this a lot with loneliness that is tied to grief. I cannot imagine the pain and sorrow to lose someone extremely close to you. But time should heal many of the wounds. But you know people who are still grieving the loss of a marriage, even though the divorce was 10

years ago. It's time to move on. You might know people who are still grieving the loss of a loved one with an intensity that is too strong for the amount of time that has passed.. And even though we will always feel that grief to some extent, it should get better. One helps the grieving person get better with the passing of time; the other causes him to get worse and sink deeper and deeper into the pit of despair. We all have only so much emotional energy - and if we put all of our energy into past relationships that are no longer possible, we cannot open ourselves to new ones that are possible.

Third wrong way to fight loneliness: Some people try to deal with their loneliness by maintaining a daily "To-do" list and sets priorities carefully. But to attempt an escape from loneliness through schedule-chasing activism promotes self-delusion of the most extreme sort. I love to-do lists. I love priorities. But I wonder if we're just trying to fill up time. To the gym, to the store, vacuum every day. Over half of graduate students who go back to school are single - higher ed loves lonely people. You can't fight loneliness with activity. For some reason, this has always stuck with me: Ralph Barton was a cartoonist a century ago, for vanity fair. You have seen his work. But he committed suicide at age 39, and his suicide note said, "I have had few difficulties, many friends, great success; I have gone from wife to wife, and from house to house, visited great countries of the world, but I am fed up with inventing devices to fill up 24 hours of the day." Sometimes we try and fix loneliness by filling the void with something else. Drugs. Alcohol, the number one cause of affairs in a marriage is loneliness, according to WebMD.

So on that happy note, how do you fight loneliness? What are the right things to do?

This is not my list, I am blatantly stealing them out of journals and source material:

1) Realize that loneliness is a feeling, not a fact. When you are feeling lonely, it is because something has triggered a memory of that feeling, not because you are in fact, isolated and alone. The brain is designed to pay attention to pain and danger, and that includes painful scary feelings; therefore loneliness gets our attention. But then the brain tries to make sense of the feeling. Why am I feeling this way? Is it because nobody loves me? Because I am a loser? Because they are all mean? Theories about why you are feeling lonely can become confused with facts. Then it becomes a bigger problem so just realize that you are having this feeling and accept it without over reacting.

2) Reach out because loneliness is painful and can confuse you into thinking that you are a loser, an outcast. You might react by withdrawing into yourself, your thoughts, and your lonely feelings and this is not helpful. At its best, anticipation of loneliness might motivate us to reach out and cultivate friendships, which is the healthiest thing to do if you are sad and alone.

3) Notice your self deflating thoughts. We often create self centered stories to explain our feelings when we are young, it is not unusual for children to assume that there is something wrong with them if they are not happy. If they are lonely and sad, children may assume other people don't like them when this is rarely the case. When you are a child, and your sadness causes you to cry, you may evoke a comforting response from others. If you're an adult, not so much. Habitual assumptions about social status continue into adulthood and if you are looking for evidence that the world stinks, you can always find it.

4) Make a plan to fight the mental and emotional habits of loneliness. If you realize you are dealing with an emotional habit, you can make a plan to deal with loneliness. Since healthy interaction with friends is good, make some effort to reach out to others, to initiate conversation and face time even when your loneliness and depression are telling you not to. Yes, it is work, but it is worthwhile, just like exercising is worthwhile even when you are feeling tired or lazy.

5) Focus on the needs and feelings of others, the less attention on your lonely thoughts and feelings. I can walk

down the street thinking about myself, my loneliness and the hopelessness of it all, staring at the sidewalk and sighing to myself. Or I can walk down the street grateful for the diversity of people I get to share the sidewalk with, silently wishing them good health and good fortune, and smiling at each person I meet. The latter is more fun, even though I sometimes have to remind myself to do it on purpose.

6) Find others like you. Now days there are more tools than ever before to find out where the knitters, hikers or kiteboarders are congregating so that you can get together with those who share your interests. This makes it much easier to identify groups with which you will have something in common, a natural basis for beginning a friendship.

8) Be curious, but don't expect perfection or applause. Each time you try and connect with others, it a micro adventure in social bonding. If you are curious about and interested in others, they will be attracted to you because you are giving them attention. So you will get attention in return. Curiosity about others also takes your focus away from those painful feelings that tend to make you hide and sulk. It can't be all about you. It can't be all about me.

9) . Kindness goes a long way. You have the power to offer loving kindness and generosity of spirit to all you come into contact with. It isn't instinctual to be kind to strangers or people who scare you. But it is a choice. It is a choice that Jesus and Ghandi used intentionally. And in the long run it is a winning choice. The alternative, being mean or stingy with those you don't know well, can get you a reputation as a Scrooge.

10. Be persistent even if a particular group does seem to be a dead end for you, try another. AA and AlAnon recommend that everyone try six different groups to find one that suits you best. If you are persistent, challenging the assumptions and feelings that tell you to give up and resign yourself to a life of loneliness, and showing up and being curious and kind to others and more and more groups, the odds are ever in your favor.

In the end, loneliness is about a lack of connection. Connection with others, connection with God. As Christian read this morning, It is good to be near God. It is good to be near others. I realize that many people here today are hurting so bad that they cannot even imagine helping someone else. You may feel like the world has forgotten you. You may even feel like God has forgotten you. I am here to remind you that God still loves you - in the midst of your sin, and in the midst of your broken world and shattered dreams. There is no problem that is too big that God cannot solve it. There is no mountain too high that God cannot cross it. There is no valley too deep that God cannot exalt it. If you're living in the Sounds of Silence - alone and not connected, maybe it's time to get rid of those ghosts and come to the land of the living, to reconnect, to find your place in the world. And the family of God said, AMEN.