

Is there a cure for loneliness? May 21, 2023.

Rev. Dr. David Thompson

Text: “And Jesus, when he had sent the multitudes away, went up into a mountain apart to pray: and when the evening was come, he was there alone.” St. Luke 5: 15-16.

On January the 26<sup>th</sup> 2018 Theresa May of the United Kingdom added a new minister to her cabinet. A Minister of Loneliness, Baroness Barran, said recently:

Although life is beginning to feel closer to normal for many people, we are still in a critical stage when it comes to tackling loneliness. There is a large number of people who felt lonely before the pandemic and will continue to do so as lockdown restrictions ease

When Britain first created this portfolio, people thought it was a joke but then the stats came out: nine million Britons suffer from loneliness or about 14% of the population. Before the pandemic 1 in 20 people felt lonely. During the pandemic it has risen to 1 in 14.

In the US a new report suggests that **36% of all Americans**—including 61% of young adults and 51% of mothers with young children—feel “serious loneliness.” Not surprisingly, loneliness appears to have increased substantially since the outbreak of the global pandemic.

David Brooks of the New York Times once wrote about mass shootings which now in the US are over 225 just this year alone!

This what he says: *There is always a pile of bodies at these massacre sites. Whether it's at a synagogue, church, nightclub or school, there's always an assault weapon, or a bunch of them. There's always the survivors clutching each other, weeping in little clumps outside. And there's always one other thing.*

*A lonely man.*

In Canada a report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) points out that **more than one-third of adults aged 45 and older, feel lonely**, and nearly one-fourth of adults aged 65 and older are considered to be socially isolated. People in Nursing homes and in their adolescent years suffer most.

Loneliness is a serious health issue as well: diabetes, heart- attacks and strokes, depression and suicide and early deaths from other challenges related to loneliness make up a rather grim array of statistics. More people die from loneliness than smoking.

In James Hillman's The Soul's Code, he break loneliness down into several parts. He says "When we look... into the sense of loneliness, we find it composed of several elements: nostalgia, sadness, silence and a yearning for something not here not now."

- 1) Nostalgia comes from the Greek word nostros or a return to home. It means homesickness or a strong desire for family and friends. People who have left their native land for another world in a different country know what nostalgia is about... It happens as well when we move to a different town or city. We remember all the good times we spent in the first community and the new community just doesn't cut it.

How do our world's refugees feel? There are so many of them today who long to return to their native land but they can't for a multitude of reasons and they are sad and lonely for the land of their birth. Oh Yes, Nostalgia is right up there in the reasons for loneliness!

- 2) Then there is sadness.

Lots of things can make us sad. The loss of a parent, a spouse, a grandmother or mother, a daughter in a tragic accident, a son lost to addiction, a beloved husband or mother to Alzheimer's. Perhaps for you it was a love affair that crashed, or a marriage that came to a sudden end,

or a job that was downsized into a soul- destroying task, or church the way it used to be in the good old days!

Perhaps for you its money- never enough- and no way to change that. Or we can be depressed at midlife when we see that our dreams have not come true and our death is nearing without any possibility of fulfillment. We can be sad about our good friends who are doing themselves in with an unhealthy lifestyle that is slowly killing them, or who have a legal addiction.

Sadness can come in a thousand ways to us. It flies in unbidden through an open window in our lives. A gift can turn sour, families can suddenly fly apart- mother or father isn't there to hold us together anymore. When you are a widow or widower how do you celebrate the old wedding anniversary?

Worse still sadness and nostalgia can merge into a kind of mental fog.

3) Then there is silence...

There is at the heart of loneliness, a silence. Sometimes there is just nothing to say. Words cease to work. Silence is often at home at a graveside. The true feelings won't express, except in silence. Silence seems to be at the very heart of loneliness. The party may be going on downstairs but you don't want to be there- to be forced to talk, to smile, and to deal with people. What you need most is silence...

4) Then there is a yearning for something else, not here not now...

Loneliness is not just experienced in adolescence or in seniors' nursing homes. It can occur in childhood with parents who punish to solve problems. It can come from a Facebook post that bullies. Mothers, who give birth, can experience it when the little life is no longer within. What must it be like to bring a child into this world and then be forced to give it up for adoption?

Oh, for something else, someone else, not here not now! The present can be cruel when we yearn!

There are a lot of attempted answers to loneliness. Modern life is alienating and rootless. Connecting on Facebook as friends may be a very shallow experience. Many well-meaning folks think that Prozac, joining recovery groups, just getting involved in a project might work to lessen the pain, and sometimes it does. Some people think that all people need to do is pick up the phone and talk to someone. But according to Hillman there is a problem below the surface that we need to deal with. This he calls **the loneliness of the soul!**

The ancient story of Adam and Eve tells of a day when human beings and God were friends. The story explains how that friendship was lost. When Adam and Eve walk with God in the garden in the cool of the day, one does not get the feeling that loneliness is present. **Instead, there is something wonderful taking place...but then stuff happens to shatter the relationship...**

In the story of Abraham, we discover him looking for a place to bury his beloved Sarah. He has no property because he is a rootless nomad. Thus, he has nowhere to bury his dead.

Abraham spent his life searching for a place where his spirit could rest. Driven by a yearning for something not here not now, he sought a city whose builder and maker was God. Was Abraham searching for that primary relationship that Adam and Eve had when they walked with the One who made all things? St. James says that **Abraham** believed God, and it was reckoned unto him for righteousness; and he was called **the friend of God.**

St Augustine was no stranger to loneliness. His first years were wild by any standard. Driven by a deep restlessness he tried to answer his inner longings with multiple relationships with women. Gradually he came to see that his yearnings could only be satisfied with **The Source** of all things. It was St. Augustine who wrote these wonderful words: “Lord,

you made us for Yourself and we can find no rest, till we find our rest in Thee.”

If we accept the Christian teaching that the yearning for loneliness is a longing for the Creator, then there might be a healing for the soul beyond psychology and Prozac- we might discover that in fact St. Augustine is right...that the very root of loneliness is that we have an unmet need for God.

There is also something else we could consider. M.D. Darcy once wrote:

“The saints reveal to others what a person can be...they unearth the hidden beauty in human beings...the saints possess a kind of peace, as if like the successful lover, they were in possession of their heart’s desire, and in this fulfillment some joy sang to them, to which all their faculties made response. They are not lonely; they are well acquainted with sorrow and they embrace pain. But everywhere they go, they are accompanied by the sunshine of Spring...”

One year I went to Rome, which is the administrative head of Roman Catholicism. Here was the formalism, the weight of tradition and the administrative wing of the church. Here the faith was more cerebral, and notwithstanding all the magnificence of St. Peter’s Basilica, Rome had a reputation for being a little cold.

One writer of a tourist brochure said that this was not so in Assisi. If one wanted to experience the **very heart** of Roman Catholicism one had to go to Assisi. The writer said that there was an inexplicable joy about Assisi just as if the saint had never left!

One day I went to Assisi. Below the double Basilica, there is a crypt where the body of St. Francis is buried.

When I entered that crypt, I felt an energy. It was mystical...beyond words. I sat there for quite awhile and took it in. It was a joyful presence

**And there was not a scrap of loneliness** there! I found it strange but very real.

One day when I was having a talk with Wayne Dyer, the psychologist, we talked about it. His eyes lit up. “ Did you feel it too?” Then he talked of this deep joy that seemed to be resident in Assisi. I knew what he was talking about...

Can loneliness be healed?

Sure, we can mask it, distract ourselves, drug it away, search for the perfect lover, but healing may not finally be there. What if St. Augustine is right? That we can find no rest until we find our rest in God?

Have you ever asked yourself the question **where is the dwelling place of God?** Where is the walk in the cool of the day? Where is the quest’s end for the City of God? Where is the end to loneliness?

Rabbi Kotzk asked this question to his students. “Where is the dwelling place of God?” They laughed at him and said “What a thing to ask. Isn’t the whole world full of God’s glory?”

They thought that they had it all figured out.

But following the laughter the Rabbi said this: “God dwells where people **let God in.**”

What is the cure for loneliness? Is it perhaps simply to let God in??

Is loneliness perhaps first and finally, a spiritual problem?

It is my personal belief that we can invite God into our loneliness, and as a light banishes the darkness in a room, so God enters in and the darkness has to leave!

Jesus had to deal with crowds. On occasions he would heal all day, and he would be spent. He would then withdraw into the hills and pray alone, nobody else present.

So, how did Jesus deal with his loneliness?

He actually tells us the secret: On Jesus instruction we are to do this: go into our room. We are to shut the door. We are to kneel down at our bedside and we are to pray. We are to deliberately invite God in to the very centre of our lives, and then a miracle can occur... **God comes in to be with us. This little verse made so famous by Holman Hunt's painting "The Light of the World" can be found here in Knox in the east entrance small window.**

**"Behold I stand at the door and knock. If any person hears my voice and opens the door I will come in and have supper with him."**

When we are spent and at the far end, depressed, sad and yes lonely, that is the time to go into the room and shut the door. Nobody else needs to be present. No faithful disciple...no witness...no other person.

One woman remarked at Knox Mitchell to me: What would we do if we could not pray?

Research shows that when we do something for others that is sacrificial, the loneliness often goes away. Some of us learn this very early in life, like Emily, who was only 9 years old. For some of us we get this only later in life.

She had been saving for almost a year, doing little odd jobs for people, in order to be able to purchase a bicycle for herself. Her father was a collector of vintage bicycles, and he had said that he could give her one of his if she didn't make enough to buy the mountain bike she longed for. But Emily did not want any old bicycle, and she let her father know that!

Christmas was coming and it looked like Emily was not going to have enough money to get the bike of her dreams. So, she and her dad went comparison shopping and looked at several less expensive bicycles that they thought she might have to settle for.

But on her way out of one store, Emily noticed a Salvation army Kettle. She asked whether they could give them something?

“Sorry!” her father replied “I’m out of change.”

“When you pray, go into your room and shut the door...”

Emily worked hard all December and it looked like she just might have enough for a mountain bike. But one day she came downstairs and announced to her mother; “You know all the money I have been saving?” “Yes dear?” said her mother.

“God told me to give it to the poor people.”

Her mother knelt down to Emily’s level and said “That is a very kind thought sweetheart, but you have been saving all year. Perhaps you could give just some of it?”

When you pray, go into your room and shut the door...

Emily shook her head vigorously: “God said **all**.”

One cold Sunday before Christmas, Emily handed her total savings of \$58 dollars to a very surprised Salvation Army volunteer.

Her father, struck by her selflessness, suddenly noticed that a car dealer was collecting refurbished bicycles to give to poor children for Christmas. And dad thought to himself.

“ If my 9 year old daughter could give away all her money I could certainly give away one refurbished bike.” As he went through his collection and found a nice shiny bike, he thought that maybe he should



give two bikes and he couldn't shake that thought. So, he turned back and loaded a second bike into the trunk of his car and took off for the dealership.

When he delivered the bikes the dealer said, "You are making two kids very happy, and here are your tickets."

"Tickets?" Her dad asked.

"Yes, for each bike donated we are giving away a chance to win a brand new 21 speed men's mountain bike. Here are your two chances!

Why wasn't her dad surprised when the second ticket won the bike? And why wasn't he surprised that the dealer substituted a girl's mountain bike for the men's?

Was this perhaps God's way of rewarding a little girl's generosity with something she had yearned for, when she made a sacrifice beyond her years, while giving her dad a lesson, in his maturity? Her father thought so.

When we go into our room and shut the door to be with God, when we do something for others that costs us, the loneliness and yearning that we feel can go away, **especially when it is the right thing to do.**

This is perhaps then the secret of the saints, of the peace that they possess, this is the heart's desire above all desires, this is the joy that sings within. And when we do something for others that costs us...there is potential for a wonderful healing that can take place for the soul's loneliness, a gift from Emmanuel or 'God with us'.

When you pray, shut the door...

Amen.

