

New St. James Presbyterian Church
Sunday, September 8, 2019
Rev. Dr. David Thompson

THE LONELY HEART CONNECTION!

"A person who has friends must show themselves friendly: and there is a friend that sticks closer than a sister or brother." Proverbs 18:24

I had a friend who lost his wife to cancer. They had had a large family together and she was the center of his world. When she passed away a huge emptiness filled his soul. I would call on him to try to cheer him up and whenever I did, I arrived at the house and the radio was on full blast. After I noticed this several times, I asked him why he had the radio on so loud all the time? He said that he found it distracting and it helped him not to think about how badly he actually felt. He was trapped in loneliness. He had lost **Connection**.

Brendan Myers in *The American Psychological Review* writes that loneliness is only a problem when we get trapped in it. He cites a study that shows that half of all Americans have only one close friend to confide in, and one quarter of all Americans have no close friends at all. Nearly half of Canadians say they are lonely, according to a new study from the Angus Reid Institute. Britain considers loneliness an epidemic, and the government has even appointed a minister dedicated to the issue.

I find that Loneliness becoming an epidemic is profoundly sad.

My friend was dealing with one of the most difficult kinds of loneliness - the loss of a loved one. But we can become lonely because we made a set of wrong choices and things did not work out as we had hoped. Or we can get lost in a role and lose authenticity. This happens to politicians, pastors, psychologists, doctors, movie stars like Whitney Houston and all sorts of caregivers who sometimes are the loneliest people in the world. They are surrounded by people but have no friends that they can trust.

Wise old Solomon taught that the answer to loneliness is **friendship**, but in order to have friends one must show oneself to be friendly. Solomon said all of us have a longing for God and so speaking about God he said, "And there is a Friend that sticks closer than any relative." (Proverbs 18:24) **Connection!**

Stan Dale, Director of the Human Awareness Institute in San Mateo California made a trip to Warsaw Poland. He wanted to meet with people and avoid all the tourist traps and so he was taken to a convalescent home for the elderly. The last person he visited was the youngest patient in the hospital; Olga, a medical doctor. When her husband had died when she was fifty, she no longer wanted to live. She was overcome with loneliness. She had attempted suicide by throwing herself under a train. The train had cut off both of her legs. Now 58 years old, she had sat alone in her room for 8 years, refusing to get out of bed.

As Stan looked at this woman who had gone through the gates of hell because of her losses, he was overcome by grief and compassion and fell to his knees and lovingly touched and stroked the stumps of her legs. He said it felt like he was compelled to do this by a Power much greater than himself.

As he did this, he said to her that he was feeling her pain and her loss. He encouraged her to use her medical skills and her experience to help her patients in the future with a greater compassion and empathy than ever before. And that, in this time of transition that Poland was going through, her country needed her more than ever. Just as her country was coming back to life from being ravaged and decimated, so must she!

He told her that she reminded him of a wounded angel and that the word angel means **messenger of love, servant of God**. He told her that angels do not need legs to fly. After about 15 minutes or so everyone in the room started sobbing. As Stan looked up through his tears, he saw Olga glowing as she called for a wheelchair and started to get out of bed for the first time in 8 years. **Connection!**

Floyd Shilansky was a financial planner often on the speaker circuit. Once he was called to speak to a special school for pregnant teens. He was to talk to them about things that might motivate them for their and their unborn child's future. In order to capture their attention, he had brought a stack of very rare two-dollar bills- all crisp and new. He started to give them out. When he did so these teens who had decided ahead of time that this was going to be a boring talk, suddenly woke up. This guy was giving out money! But he did so on one condition: They must not spend it **on themselves**. He told them that they each had children who were unborn, and he was doing this as an act of faith in the fact that he believed **that they could move their lives forward**. By doing this he was pulling for their success. He said that his grandfather had done this for him. He also said that if they were ever in trouble that they could call him. He wouldn't promise that he would help but he was willing to listen and to try to do anything for them. If they wanted a copy of his book, they were to call his office and he would send them one free.

In this class there was one very lonely teenager, soon to be an unwed mother, with no one to care for her. Three days later Floyd got this crumpled little note in the mail.

Dear Floyd: Thank-you for giving me the crisp new two-dollar bill. I will cherish it forever and I have written my child's name on it. The reason I am writing is because the day you talked to our class, I had made a decision that morning. I had cleaned out my desk, paid whatever bills I owed to the school, and I was going to take my and my unborn child's life, because I really didn't think anyone cared. When you told the story of someone pulling for you, it brought tears to my eyes and I thought that our lives were not ready to be terminated. The fact is I will probably stick around awhile, because there are people like you that care about people like me, that don't even know me.

Gandhi once wrote: **"It's the action not the fruit of the action that's important. You have to do the right thing. It may not be in your power, may not be in your time, that there**

will be any fruit. But that doesn't stop you from doing the right thing. You may never know what results come from your action. But if you do nothing, there will be no result."

When Floyd did something for someone who was lonely, he saved two lives - an unborn child saved with an act of kindness to her mother who was a total stranger to him.

I believe in the power of a smile for someone who is lonely. There is a woman I know who serves coffee in Hortons who has the best smile. Her eyes crinkle up in the friendliest way and she really smiles at you. And it is genuine...real. I find that if I am down and I encounter her my day changes for the better. She connects! Do you have that gift?

We can meet people's loneliness in little things: being courteous to the cashier with the long line who looks down, a warm handshake when we meet someone, or a hug after someone tells us a sad story. We can shovel someone's driveway or put back their recycle box or give them a hand when they have a chore to do or they need a lift to carry something heavy. There are opportunities everyday to make a difference when we see someone who needs help, and who isn't likely to get it, **unless we act.**

I have a question for you. Why is it that we all find loneliness so hard to bear?

For most of us there is, I believe, a spiritual longing for God placed inside of us that cannot be satisfied until there is a Divine connection to our lives that is healing and comforting especially in times of sorrow. We long for a Great Someone who sticks closer to us than a brother or sister a mother or a father or even a lover; Someone who is there for us through thick and thin, Someone who would perhaps risk their life for us, in order to save us.

I think that all of us can have such a relationship with God. We do it through prayer. Whatever the difficulty we have, we can tell God all about it. It's so simple to do. As Jesus suggested, we can go to our room and shut the door and be alone with God. As the Hebrew Scriptures tell us 'God rewards those who diligently seek him'. If we do not pray and get alone with God, we are left with this unsatisfied longing...As St. Augustine said: "Our souls are restless until they find their rest in Thee."

The reason the Scriptures talk about opening our hearts to others as the cure for loneliness is simply because we are all connected. If we don't **feel** that connection and get that feeling **reinforced** with **actions**, we can literally die. If a baby does not receive love it can fail to thrive and can die. Love seems to be part of who we are, and giving and receiving it, are the huge keys to dealing with loneliness and replacing it with vitality, will to live, and a will to thrive!

All of us will have to deal with the absolute fact that we will die.

But some few of us will know ahead that we do not have much time left. When the doctor says we have three weeks or six months to live, will we go into separation anxiety and feel sad and alone? Or will we really feel it; let it in and then decide to live until we die, helping others along their way if we can?

John Stewart, of this congregation did exactly that when he knew that he had a fatal diagnosis. He said to me “David I want to go out serving God and others.” He did that to his last moments!

I want to tell you a story...

Linda Birtish was told by her doctor at the age of 28 that she had a brain tumor. They told her that her chances of surviving the operation were about 2%. Therefore, rather than operate immediately they suggested waiting six months. Linda was an artist and so during those six months she wrote and drew feverishly. All of her poetry was published in magazines **except for one little piece**. All of her art, **except for one drawing** was shown and sold at galleries. The six months went by and the night before her operation she literally decided to give herself away. She donated all her body parts. Linda’s operation was fatal to her. Subsequently her eyes went to an eye bank recipient in South Carolina.

A young, 28-year-old man, her very age, went from darkness to sight. He was so grateful that he wrote the eye bank thanking them for existing. It was only the second thank-you they had received after giving more than 30,000 eyes. Further, he wanted to thank the parents of the donor. He was given the name of a UK family on Staten Island. After hearing his story at their door, Mrs. Birtish reached out and pulled him into her arms. She said, “Young man if you have nowhere to go, I would like you to spend the weekend with us.” He stayed.

He looked into Linda’s room and saw that she had read Plato. He had read Plato in Braille. She had read Hegel. He had read Hegel in Braille. The next morning Mrs. Birtish was looking at him curiously and said “You know, I’m sure I’ve seen you somewhere before. But I don’t know where.”

All of a sudden, she remembered! She ran upstairs and pulled out the last picture Linda had drawn. It was a portrait of her ideal man. The picture was identical to the young man who had received Linda’s eyes. Then her mother read the last poem Linda had written from her death bed. It read: ***Two hearts passing in the night, Falling in love, Never able to gain each other’s sight***

Connection!!

The answer to loneliness, to a meaningful life, to a good death and to knowing that, no matter what happens, we are Divinely guided and protected; is to understand that we are all connected to God and each other.

That Connection can end our loneliness permanently.

As the Beatles said about making that wonderful connection work: “Love is all you need.”