

Sermon – Epiphany 6 – St Luke and St Matthew, Brooklyn

Luke 6: 17-26

When some people's pain and suffering completely overwhelms them they can feel that God is far away, or even that God doesn't exist. When we find ourselves in this position it can be incredibly lonely and isolating. I have found in my ministry to those that live rough, suffer with chronic health issues or mental illness or deeply grieve the death of a love one, that isolation, detachment and loneliness are common factors.

Loneliness is becoming a major health epidemic in western countries because it leads to mental health deterioration and depression. It has become of such concern that the British Government now has a separate ministry of loneliness to tackle what they see as a crisis.

The crisis of modern day loneliness has its roots in our disconnectedness from family and society. The thrust of the British Government's attempts to address loneliness is what they call 'social prescribing' by primary physicians, which allows patients to connect with various social activities that fit their interests and capacity. Loneliness is proven to be detrimental to human health with increased rates of obesity, smoking, depression, heart disease and stroke. The community cost of loneliness is extraordinarily high.

The United States isn't immune from this health crisis but I don't hear our government talking about it. Maybe this is where public support for government intervention in community health falters. If loneliness has a high social cost it must be damaging to the nation both socially and economically.

An innate part of our human creation is our need for social connection whether it be through the family unit or through community generally. Since the first communities came into being we know through anthropological studies that social connectedness to family and the spirit world was the basis of community life. Almost all indigenous cultures developed ways of connecting with each other and the spirit world.

Scripture records the effort of God to connect with human beings. First God created a mate for Adam so that he would not be alone. God then connected with Abraham by making him aware of the presence of God and helping him to be open to hearing God speak to him. Moses then saw the manifestation of God first in the burning bush, then in the cloud and the tablets inscribed with the law. Finally, God lead Moses and the Israelites from slavery, using a cloud in the daytime and a pillar of fire in the nighttime to guide them.

God raised up kings at the insistence of the Israelites who wanted monarchical leadership like everyone else. Then God raised up prophets to proclaim God's desire for a just society and to announce the herald of the new king, the messiah to come. God constantly tried to encourage people to turn away from idol worship toward the one true God upon whom the future of the world rested. People seemed to prefer the immediate, tangible presence of the spirit in carved or cast image of a supposedly sacred god.

Belief in a spirit God seemed difficult for most people despite the revelation of God in all manner of ways. Many people didn't want to live a life where they shared their resources, and lived in harmony with one another. The powerful few with resources, often garnered unfairly from others, rose up to put their faith in Baal and other earthly Gods like money and power, rather than the living God who encouraged justice, mercy and love amongst families and communities.

It is to these people that Jeremiah speaks to in the passage we hear this morning. Those that turn from God will be cursed. He compares them to a desert shrub that tries to survive in the harshest of places, often missing out on the pitiful small amount of rain that falls periodically in the desert.

By comparison Jeremiah says that those that put their trust in the Lord, and indeed who see trust as the Lord, shall be like shrubs that are planted near the stream, that are able to put down deep roots into the moist ground to feed and to be strongly anchored. When the heat of life comes, the shrub will not need to fear because it will be strong and when the drought comes it will not need to be anxious because it is being fed from below.

God knows that we are led by our hearts to places of immediate satisfaction, putting aside the wisdom of knowing that we risk being blown about by the wind or starved by a drought. The life of following the living God is no guarantee of immediate relief from suffering but it does result in developing the capability to be able to sustain oneself in life. As humans, we continue to struggle against the desires of our hearts for immediate satisfaction and for relief from the powerful forces at work in our daily lives.

The evolution of social media has changed the way a lot of people in the world relate to each other. Social media companies are now some of the most valuable companies in the world attesting to the way people connect with each other and view advertisements.

Over the past year I've felt myself being drawn ever so deeply into the lives of many people with Instagram profiles. I would never meet these people in my physical world, let alone access their private and intimate lives. I've also become curious about social media 'influencers.' These are people who attract enough followers that commercial enterprises sponsor them and provide them with free merchandise or vacations or other income. The number one influencer on Instagram is a woman called Huda Kattan, a beauty influencer with some 24m followers, which happens to be the population of Australia.

There is nothing inherently wrong with Instagram or Facebook or any number of other social media platforms so long as the follower is sufficiently grounded in their lives so as not to be drawn fully into an online life, forsaking the real world for access to the lives of online personalities. Many 'influencers' themselves report that their lives are often lonely because they have forsaken intimate physical relationships for the online world. It is their followers that they need to satisfy with endless content otherwise they will lose their influence and maybe their livelihood and for some, meaning.

We are reminded often in scripture of the consequences of putting our faith in 'mere mortals' ahead of the living God. When we feel God is far from us or non-existent to us, we can succumb to a misplaced form of human connection like the online world. God is in fact closer to all of us than we can ever imagine, we just need to open our hearts to trust that the Lord is there for us.

In the gospel passage we heard today Jesus, the manifestation of God, expounds on this concept when he outlines for the disciples a series of blessings and woes. To be poor, hungry, depressed, hated, excluded, reviled and defamed is not a nice place to be in life. You might have experienced one of these feelings in your own life. We all suffer when we experience these feelings. To suffer without knowing God is close by, raises fear and anxiety to a level that is almost too much to bear.

To suffer these same feelings knowing God is with us helps sustain us through the time of trial. Even the wealthy suffer loneliness and those that have everything feel hungry for meaning and those that appear always happy and blessed might indeed mourn, weep and experience loneliness behind the camera lens.

Jesus really is the ultimate 'influencer' and we are his followers. The spiritual life that Jesus calls us into requires from us a change of heart, a conversion if you will. Spiritual writer Henry Nouwen calls this, "an inner experience of oneness"¹ with God. This change of heart starts first with a realization of the emptiness or meaninglessness of how we live our lives, the relationships we have and the places and people from which we seek connection and fulfillment.

When God becomes the core or kernel of our lives, or rather when we acknowledge God is the kernel of our lives, the challenge of life that weighs on us becomes part of the mystery of God's life with us. What were seemingly impossible challenges now become opportunities, affirmations and revelations of a new life. In our struggles, God might be revealing something of importance so having a spiritual and prayerful life will allow deeper connection with God, and a clearer understanding of meaning.

Loneliness is indeed a significant issue for our neighborhood and for our city. God continues to draw us into relationships that help us to connect with others face to face, heart to heart. When we gather as a community of faith we are connecting as a community with each other and with God to give thanks for sustaining us and for the life of Jesus Christ. We are as a church to be a place of welcome and connection.

Jesus taught his apostles what it meant to go out into the world to connect with others and to show them that God is our life's foundation, the rock upon which our fragile lives can be built. Let us allow God fully into our lives, let us trust in the Lord, be healed and feel blessed even as we struggle on life's shifting sands.

Amen

¹ Nouwen Henri *Making All Things New, an invitation to the spiritual life* Harper Collins, New York, 1981 p57