

Pastor Jamie's Sermon

Good Shepherd Church, December 8, 2024

“We Can't Go Alone”

The Message

Did you know that in 2023, the US Surgeon General put out a lengthy and detailed report declaring loneliness an epidemic in the US?

And it's not just a US problem, of course.

In 2018 (pre-COVID, by the way), the UK appointed its first “Minister for Loneliness.” Japan followed suit in 2021.

Australia and New Zealand both have national loneliness reduction strategies, and China has gone so far as to pass a law stating that adult children must visit their parents regularly.

And, of course, Canada is not immune to the issue – people here struggle with common problems that are being faced in every first-world nation.

Now, we could discuss the causes of this “epidemic,” but we would probably be here all day if we did that.

I do think, however, that it is worth mentioning some of the important information from the US Surgeon General's report:

- 1 in 2 adults reported experiencing loneliness (even *before* the COVID pandemic)
- Loneliness is associated with greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety, and premature death
- The consequences of loneliness impact our schools, workplaces, and civic organizations

One of the most important things the Surgeon General says in his report is, “We are called to build a movement to mend the social fabric of our nation.”

Of course, he's referring to the US specifically, but this sounds like a profound call to our churches to help build a movement to mend the social fabric of our communities.

Interestingly, I wonder how much of an impact the “Minister for Loneliness,” or the loneliness reduction strategies have had in other countries?

The reason I wonder is because it seems unlikely that any kind of government program to counteract loneliness could be truly effective.

For starters, people have to *want* to address their own loneliness. But secondly, people have to *want* to address loneliness for others, as well.

Certainly, we feel a sense of empathy for those who feel loneliness.

But I wonder how many people actually articulate to others that they feel lonely?

How many people even recognize loneliness in themselves?

Loneliness can be hard to address because it falls on a spectrum.

We can be surrounded by people and still feel lonely.

We can be in a relationship with another person and feel lonely if our needs for connection aren't being met.

Likewise, some of us can be perfectly content to spend a lot of time alone, and yet still be socially isolated.

Additionally, social media users can have hundreds or even thousands of "friends" or "followers," and still feel lonely when they see those "friends" sharing the incredible things happening in their lives.

Sometimes, our life circumstances can create feelings of loneliness.

Moving away from friends and family can be socially isolating, especially when it has become harder and harder for adults to make friends.

Similarly, having a friend or family member that you are close to move away can create feelings of loneliness for people who depended on their presence back home.

It is truly no wonder that 1 in 2 adults struggles with feelings of loneliness.

Loneliness is very much a modern phenomenon.

A lot of this is a function of how we live today, and the push toward independence instead of communal living.

We are far more individualistic today.

We have also seen a significant decline in the number of people who participate in religious communities or faith communities, and we have seen a rise in online

social media platforms where people are simultaneously connected to more people electronically but disconnected from people in the real world.

So, where does this leave us? It all sounds quite hopeless.

If lawmakers and government officials can't solve the problem, how do we even begin to address it?

Well, I think the Surgeon General said it best when he said "we are called to build a movement to mend the social fabric" of our communities and, by extension, of the world.

No one person is going to be able to step in and wave a magic wand to fix loneliness.

Rather, this needs to be addressed on the local and on the individual level.

We need to be practicing kindness and compassion as much as possible.

I also think we probably need to be committing to stepping away from social media and our cell phones more often and interacting with real people instead.

However, to do that, we need to actively choose to involve ourselves in some kind of community.

I worry about our younger generations in this sense, including my own.

How do we create a movement, especially with younger generations, when they have known nothing but social media as a primary way of connecting with people?

I know that many people worry about how involved in sports and other recreational activities our young people are, but I see this as a positive for them because at least they are socializing and connecting with people in real life.

The people I worry about most right now is mid-life adults.

Adults my own age, who may or may not have children and families, but who often work from home alone all day and struggle to get involved in things outside of work.

I can attest to the difficulty of finding and *maintaining* friendships as an adult. Developing new friendships is especially difficult as we get older, and because our lives are busy, it can also be difficult to find the energy to involve ourselves in community.

What can we do to help and support others?

Like Ruth, we need to choose kindness, and we might need to sacrifice a bit for others.

Ruth chooses to stay with her mother-in-law, Naomi, rather than seek to find another husband.

She maintains the important connection with Naomi in a world where the social norm would have been for her to move on to another husband and forget about Naomi completely.

But doing that would have left both women lonely and isolated.

Instead, Ruth chooses kindness. Together, they form a new family and a new covenant with one another.

This new family they formed was built not on blood, but on *kinship*.

Ruth dared to believe that her life was better intertwined with Naomi's.

Neither of them were meant to journey alone, and Ruth believed that wholeheartedly.

When loneliness begins to creep in on us, it can cause us to start to think that we are the *only* person carrying the weight of loneliness.

Feeling alone in the struggle causes a cascade of other thoughts of inadequacy, insecurity, and insignificance.

The good news is that the only way for us to really address this problem is to cultivate compassionate community.

The reason this is good news is because we already do this quite well here at this church.

And our call as individuals the moment we step out of this building is to continue cultivating compassionate community.

That said, the statistics would seem to indicate that if 1 in 2 adults struggle with loneliness, it could be the case that about half of us in this room feel a sense of loneliness despite our connection to this community of faith.

Those feelings of loneliness can be especially strong this time of year, when many people struggle with loneliness or grief.

But we cannot go alone, nor were we meant to.

If you are one who is finding yourself dealing with feelings of loneliness, I encourage you to connect with someone you trust and share those feelings.

It can be someone in this community, or it can be another trusted person. It will mean being vulnerable, which isn't easy.

But don't let those feelings consume you.

We can each commit to kindness and compassion, to helping the stranger, or to extending an invitation.

But we also need to commit ourselves to sharing in our grief and loneliness because we are not meant to walk this path alone.

There are people in this community who would be happy to walk with you, talk with you, or listen as you share.

I would encourage you to reach out to someone if you are able.

It can be incredibly hard to admit to feeling lonely, but if we can't admit it to ourselves and we don't feel like we can share it with others, then we will perpetuate our own cycle of loneliness.

And this is where the call to build a movement comes into play.

Movements begin with individuals and small groups who are committed to speaking the truth in a kind and compassionate way.

Our movement may begin within the walls of this church but could very quickly expand into our own communities.

If we are called to create a movement to begin mending the social fabric of our communities, then let it begin with each of us.

Let us work together to break the cycles of loneliness. Let us walk with one another and remind each other often that "we cannot go alone, nor were we meant to go alone."

Beloved, you are not alone on this winding journey.

May the companionship of fellow sojourners reflect the love of the One who – in becoming flesh – chose to journey alongside us.

May the quilt of life warm you from the chill of isolation, and may the Spirit move you to compassion as you cultivate community, even in times of uncertainty.
Amen.

Let us pray: Holy God, The words of this world whip around us like a mighty wind. We are caught up in news reports, in text messages, in emails and notifications. We are drowning in updates from the media, caught off guard by the constant hum of it all. But here on this bright morning we remember: you too are speaking. Still the voices around us. Calm our minds and center our hearts so that we can hear your words above the wind. We are leaning closer. We are at the edge of our chairs. We are beginning again. Speak to us, as only you can. Amen.

“Prayer by Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed | A Sanctified Art LLC | sanctifiedart.org.”

Sermon References: Commentary by Kayla Craig | A Sanctified Art LLC | sanctifiedart.org.

C2C Journal: Ideas that Lead | <https://c2cjournal.ca/2023/01/a-kingdom-of-one-the-great-loneliness-pandemic-and-what-not-to-do-about-it/>

Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation; 2023 US Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community