

“Helping others to feel called”

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Isaiah 49:1-7; John 1:29-42

Isaiah 49:1-7

Listen to me, O coastlands; pay attention, you peoples from far away! The Lord called me before I was born; while I was in my mother’s womb he named me.

² *He made my mouth like a sharp sword; in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow; in his quiver he hid me away.*

³ *And he said to me, “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.”*

⁴ *But I said, “I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the Lord and my reward with my God.”*

⁵ *And now the Lord says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the sight of the Lord, and my God has become my strength—*

⁶ *he says, “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”*

⁷ *Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, “Kings shall see and stand up; princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”*

John 1:29-42

²⁹ *The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”* ³⁰ *This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’* ³¹ *I myself did not know him, but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.”* ³² *And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.”* ³³ *I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’* ³⁴ *And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Chosen One.”*

³⁵ *The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples,* ³⁶ *and as he watched Jesus walk by he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!”* ³⁷ *The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.*

³⁸ *When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, “What are you looking for?” They said to him, “Rabbi” (which translated means Teacher), “where are you staying?”* ³⁹ *He said to them, “Come and see.” They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon.* ⁴⁰ *One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother.* ⁴¹ *He first found his brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which is translated Anointed).*

⁴² *He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas” (which is translated Peter).*

I have been seeing a great many news articles and commentary recently about the loneliness epidemic, not just in this country but around the world. The articles ranged from describing the differences between terms like “lonely,” “isolated,” and “alone.” Being alone is not necessarily negative. Being isolated is a *type* of being alone. And being isolated *often leads to* loneliness. Many articles emphasized the relationship between loneliness and our mental and physical health.

According to Lori Santos in her interview on the PBSNewsHour, “Some surveys reveal that around 60 percent of people in the U.S. right now report feeling lonely on a pretty regular basis.

This is worse than rates of obesity. This is worse than rates of diabetes. Vivek Murthy the current surgeon general estimates that reporting that you feel lonely is like smoking 15 cigarettes a day in terms of its impact on our health and our well-being.¹

This last part of the quote startled me. I thought that our biological needs were far greater than our psycho-social needs, and that while one affects the other the two remain at a distance. In other words 15 cigarettes a day will kill me, but loneliness is something I can put up with.

Associate Professor Lisa Williams from the University of New South Wales School of Psychology says that because we are designed to be socially connected, our interaction with the world is shaped by those connections. She writes, “When we don’t have that, it can be just as distressing and maladaptive as not securing any other fundamental need.” Distinguishing between the kind of loneliness we can put up with, and the loneliness that the world is experiencing now, she says, “Momentary loneliness is like being hungry right now. Chronic loneliness is like starvation, and it can have dire consequences.”²

Looking to psychologist Abraham Maslow’s theory of the hierarchy of needs I’m reminded that after physiological needs like air, water, food, safety and security, the most fundamental of our social needs is that of belonging. Rather than thinking of Maslow’s hierarchy as clearly delineated hard distinctions (Maslow never did use the triangle model), the theory reflects a general path humans pass through before being able to successfully move toward his description of highest human potential. Humans learn how to get their most fundamental needs met, by creating connections that bring about good outcomes. Without connections, forward growth is nearly impossible.³

Although loneliness has been trending upward in the U.S. since the 1970’s, many want to blame the current trend toward loneliness on the pandemic. Arthur Brooks wrote an article in Atlantic, considering the isolation that covid forced us into, and notices that many are not re-entering society as they had before covid. While some cited remaining health concerns or pre-existing autoimmune compromised conditions, he was surprised to hear that many just didn’t make the time. Brooks says that many people have just learned to be lonely. He writes, “Going from surviving to thriving is crucial for healing and growth after a disaster, and scholars have [shown](#) that it can be a common experience. Often, the worst conditions bring out the best in people as they work together for their own recovery and that of their neighbors. COVID-19 appears to be resistant to this phenomenon, unfortunately. The most salient social feature of the pandemic was how it forced people into isolation; for those fortunate enough not to lose a loved one, the major trauma it created was loneliness. Instead of coming together, emerging evidence suggests that we are in the midst of a long-term crisis of habitual loneliness, in which relationships were severed and never reestablished.”

The Church is uniquely qualified to be a major player in addressing the loneliness epidemic. We are uniquely qualified to provide a physical space, an emotional safety net, and a solid message to help provide people with that fundamental need to belong. To feel of consequence, to have a place to find a purposeful life, meaningful friendships, and a shared sense of identity.

The Church is not the only place to do this. We sometimes talk about the need to have a third place. Your home, your work, and then a third place where you are loved, cared for, have something to contribute. For me it was always a performing community, some music related venture. I always thought of that as my first place, my job and family might have been second or third! It could be an activity club – bowling, knitting, writing; a book club, a dinner club, a neighborhood pub; some place where you have interests in common with others. I'm sure you can think of more.

The Church has a unique role in providing community, because it is the only community that begins with the premise that everyone belongs to God. Both of our scriptures for today remind us of that. Isaiah reminds us that God called us before we were born. We were named by God while we were still in our mother's womb – the womb, that place of creation and care and reliance on the mother for survival. The womb, that archetypical place of warmth, being held, being safe, completely protected. In that space, God called everyone by name. Of all of the places to belong, the Church makes a powerful statement and claim on us all.

In chapter 49, Isaiah is crying a word of hope to the people who have been exiled, reminding them that God has promised to bring forth a servant. This servant, the Messiah, will do more than raise up the tribes of Jacob, and restore the survivors of Israel, but this servant will be a light to all nations. Not just nations in the immediate area, but nations to the end of the earth. The servant Isaiah speaks of does not even know they are a servant, and will be despised. Nevertheless, God raises up unlikely servants who are then recognized because God has chosen them. The word of hope that Isaiah speaks has been fulfilled in Christ.

John the Baptist understands this, and as he gathers his own disciples with his message of forgiveness, he constantly reminds them, I am not the one. Someone else is. Our text today tells of two of John's disciples who decided to follow Jesus. While the two were with John, John said to them as Jesus passed by, "Here is the lamb of God. This is he of whom I have spoken." The disciples heard John, and took off to follow Jesus. Jesus noticed they were following and did this very important thing: he asked them what they were looking for. Jesus did not have an ego and say something like, "Oh, hey, aren't you glad you found me? Come on, follow me, do what I say!" Jesus wanted to meet them where they were. Jesus asks us first, what is it you are looking for?

Our mission is to be with others, others who are lonely, others who are isolated, others who are out of the habit or have forgotten how to meet others, "what are you looking for?" We don't get to decide for people what they want or need. But we can ask. Jesus asked and said "Come and see." Jesus didn't tell them what to look for, or even what he was showing them. Jesus asked, listened, and led. The two followed.

What happens next begins the pattern of discipleship that we are called to participate in. Jesus didn't call to Simon. It was Andrew, one of the original two, who went to get his brother Simon, and brought him to Jesus. And then Jesus, just like the prophet Isaiah promised, called Simon by name and named him. ***"You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).***

This is the unique call of the Church. We who are followers, learn from the teacher, and we are called to find another and ask, what are you looking for? If loneliness is the epidemic it seems to be, what a perfect antidote we have to that state of being. We too are unlikely servants called to participate in God's great mission. This pattern of asking, sharing, inviting and Jesus naming is how Christianity works. According to Martin Luther King, it is how God's universe is made.

He writes, "Through our scientific and technological genius, we have made of this world a neighborhood and yet we have not had the ethical commitment to make of it a brotherhood. But somehow, and in some way, we have got to do this. We must all learn to live together as brothers or we will all perish together as fools. We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality.... This is the way God's universe is made; this is the way it is structured."⁵

When I talk to people who are looking for a church, the first thing they ask is "does your church do service in the community?" Folks are looking for relevance from the Church. The Church is no longer a place just to go and worship, our worship is meant to equip us to do God's work in the community. So let's go out. Out from this place, to do God's work.

It's a good question for everyone. What *are* you looking for?

Let's pray....

¹<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/why-americans-are-lonelier-and-its-effects-on-our-health>

²<https://newsroom.unsw.edu.au/news/health/loneliness-unpacking-silent-epidemic-damaging-our-health>

³<https://www.techtargt.com/whatis/definition/Maslows-hierarchy-of-needs>

⁴https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2023/01/loneliness-solitude-pandemic-habit/672631/?mc_cid=c39edd1daa&mc_eid=8ec4c47ea9

⁵MLK quote from "The Prophetic Faith of Martin Luther King, Jr."
(from "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution")

Other:

<https://www.mayoclinichealthsystem.org/hometown-health/speaking-of-health/is-having-a-sense-of-belonging-important#:~:text=The%20social%20ties%20that%20accompany,difficult%20times%20in%20our%20lives.>

<https://www.rootsofloneliness.com/loneliness-statistics>