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Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Follow the Loneliness”

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Matthew 6:6

But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

This is the Word of the Lord

Follow the Loneliness

After I graduated from college, I spent several weeks traveling through Europe. Some friends had made similar plans, so we decided to travel together for part of the trip, but I was clear I wanted to travel alone for at least a week. It seemed to me that being alone in a foreign country was an important experience to have as I embarked on adulthood. So after two weeks of backpacking throughout France and Italy with friends, I set off by myself for the town of Heidelberg, Germany. I got on the train and settled in with my book and some snacks. But the train was slowed down by some bad weather and mechanical problems, and by the time we finally arrived in Heidelberg I had finished my book and my snacks, and it was pitch dark and pouring rain. Oh, and I didn't speak a word of German.

I had made a reservation at a hostel and somehow figured out which bus to get on from the train station (keep in mind this was long before you could just pull up Google maps on your cell phone or call on Uber with a few clicks!). But after riding the bus for several stops, I realized I had gotten on the bus going in the wrong direction. I got off and stood in the pouring rain as I waited and waited for the bus going the other way. Finally, it came, but by the time I made my way to the hostel, I was a wet and miserable mess. So when the hostel owner answered the door, gave me a critical once-over, and told me she had given my bed to someone else hours before (thankfully she spoke English!), I couldn't help it I burst into tears. "Please," I said, "I don't have anywhere else to go." She took pity on me and gave me a sleeping bag and a pillow and let me sleep on the floor of one of the bedrooms. But I didn't sleep much that night. I spent the whole night trying to figure out why on earth I thought it would be a good idea to spend a week traveling alone. That night I discovered the difference between being alone and being existentially lonely. In last week's sermon I shared the statistic that of all these hazards to our health: living with pollution or obesity, drinking too much alcohol, or suffering from chronic loneliness, it is loneliness that puts us in the greatest danger.

We know that loneliness affects human beings in detrimental ways. This is why, in prison, the worst punishment you can get is to be sent to the SHU the solitary housing unit, sometimes also known as solitary confinement. I recently heard interviews with prison inmates who had each spent years in the SHU one had spent twenty-six years there and they made clear that such isolation takes a terrible toll.

In the SHU, inmates can lose their grip on reality, their ability to communicate clearly, and any sense of dignity. “The true intent of isolation,” one man said, “is to belittle you, demean you, dehumanize you, to make you less a person than what you are.”¹ And yet, all of these men who had spent years in solitary confinement described something else, too, something that was an unintended consequence of this attempt at punishment. They described how their time in solitary confinement taught them things about themselves they could not imagine learning any other way things like what they really cared about, what was most important to them, and the true value of human connection. In other words, this punishment meant to dehumanize them actually led them to a deeper sense of their humanity. Now, to be clear, I am not advocating for solitary confinement as an effective form of punishment. But the stories these men told of being forced to endure isolation for days, months, or years at a time, is a reminder of both how ill-equipped most of us are at enduring any hint of loneliness and that facing this loneliness teaches us something about ourselves. As a society, we have developed all manner of distractions that keep us from having to experience solitude, not the least of which are. These little devices we can carry around with us and which can connect us with people all over the world with just a few taps.

I don’t think that’s a good thing. Most of us experience loneliness as bad, as something to be avoided at all costs, and if we have a way to avoid it, we will.

And yet, at the very beginning of his ministry, right after getting baptized, what do the gospels say that Jesus did? He spends forty days in the desert, completely alone. Alone in the desert, he first encounters, not God, but Satan, tempting him with all kinds of ways to escape the pain of his loneliness. And when Jesus gives his followers advice about prayer, what does he say? Don’t pray in front of others, where you’ll be tempted to make it look like you’ve got it all together, that you don’t really need God at all. Instead, pray in private. Go into a room, close and lock the door, and maybe, just maybe, in your solitude and even in your loneliness, you’ll find the courage to bring your true self before God.

Jesus knows that loneliness and solitude are two sides of the same coin, and sometimes when we seek out one we encounter the other. Jesus also knows that both loneliness and solitude have something to teach us about who we are, who

¹ “Ear Hustle” podcast, Season 1, Episode 4, “The SHU,” July 26, 2017. <https://www.earhustlesq.com/transcripts/>

God has made us to be, and it is something that we can learn only by, going toward solitude and loneliness rather than avoiding them however way we can.

At the age of twelve, Eugene Peterson decided to start reading the Bible for himself, rather than just hearing the Bible read in church. Someone suggested that he start by reading the Psalms, which he did, but he found them deeply confusing. He had grown up in a Christian tradition which taught that the Bible was to be read literally, but in the Psalms, Peterson quickly encountered phrases like, "God is my rock," and "You put my tears in your bottle" ideas that made no sense as literal, factual statements. This, Peterson says, is how he learned what a metaphor is.

But even more than teaching him about language, the Psalms taught Peterson what it looks like to show up before God **as we are**, not as we think we are supposed to be. Peterson now likes to say that the psalms train us in *honest* prayer.²

The psalms are indeed prayers of individuals who are often overcome with emotion. In some of the psalms, these emotions are positive joy, hope, passionate praise. But in others, like Psalm 102, we overhear the prayer of an individual in the depths of despair, desolation, and isolation.

We hear the prayer of one who is deeply, existentially, *lonely*. *I lie awake. I am like a lonely bird on a housetop. All day long my enemies taunt me.* This is the prayer of one who has nothing to hide, the honest prayer of someone who is willing to be utterly vulnerable before God.

Maybe that's why a psalm like this one can be hard for us to hear. Not just because it is hard for us to encounter the suffering of another human being, but because we recognize it. Who among us has not experienced, at one time or another, the feeling that we are truly alone? As a species, we are clearly drawn to experiences that help us avoid loneliness we cultivate communities, both real and virtual. We form addictions to all kinds of behaviors eating, drinking, shopping, gambling, sex that help us deal with difficult emotions; and we go to great lengths to show up at home, at work, at school, and even at church as the best version of ourselves, regardless of whether or not it is the most honest version. But Jesus's

² OnBeing podcast, Eugene Peterson: The Bible, Poetry, and Active Imagination, August 30, 2018, <https://onbeing.org/programs/eugene-peterson-the-bible-poetry-and-active-imagination-aug2018/>

advice about prayer suggests that, from time to time, there is value is going toward the loneliness we try to avoid, even in seeking it out.

This is how Eugene Peterson translates Jesus's words in Matthew 6:6:

Here's what I want you to do: Find a quiet, secluded place so you won't be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage.

The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense [God's] grace. (The Message)

One summer night when he was fifteen, Ian Cron and some of his friends decided that it would be hilarious to run naked through the banquet room of an exclusive country club in their town of Greenwich Connecticut. But Greenwich is a small town, and they knew someone would inevitably recognize them, a problem they solved by wearing ski masks to cover their faces. At about 9 pm, they streaked through the wood-paneled room filled with bankers and heiresses. The men clapped and cheered while the women stood frozen in shock. The next morning, as Ian rummaged through the fridge, his mother casually asked, "what did you do last night?" "Not much," he answered. "Just hung out at Mike's and went to bed around midnight." Ian's usually chatty mother said nothing, which instantly gave Ian an uneasy feeling. "What did you and dad do?" he asked. "We were guests of the Dorfman's at their golf club banquet." Then she fixed her son with a steely gaze before she spoke. "A ski mask? **A ski mask?**" Putting her face right up to his she said, "I could pick your scrawny butt out of a lineup in the dark."³

We might think we are doing a great job of hiding our pain and our loneliness, and while we might succeed, to some degree at least, from hiding our less desirable parts from each other, God is the one who made us and who knows us intimately. And if we think we can hide from God, we are fooling only ourselves.

Thomas Merton once wrote,

Sooner or later we must distinguish between what we are not and what we are.

We must accept the fact that we are not what we would like to be.

We must cast off our false, exterior self like the cheap and showy garment it is.

We must find our real self, in all its elemental poverty

but also in its very great and very simple dignity:

³ Ian Morgan Cron and Suzanne Stabile, *The Road Back to You: An Enneagram Journey to Self-Discovery*. IVP Books, 2016, pp. 21-22.

Created to be a child of God, and capable of loving with something of God's own sincerity and [God's] unselfishness.⁴

What we learn from the Bible, and especially from the honest prayers in the psalms, is that there is value in following the loneliness that so repels us, even in seeking it out from time to time. When we do, we might just discover that solitude and even loneliness can lead to something quite profound: a better understanding of our truest identity as children of a loving and gracious God, and a deeper connection with the God who created us and knows us completely, the God from whom we simply cannot hide.

The prayer of the lonely is prayer without pretension. The prayer of the lonely is the prayer of the humble who no longer has anything left to prove or to hide. The prayer of the lonely is a prayer that happens when we quit trying to disguise ourselves or distract ourselves from the pain of the loneliness that exists deep within each one of us. When we embrace the courage to follow that loneliness and show up, dripping wet, dead tired, and not speaking the language, and beg God to take us in, trusting that God always will. God always will.

Amen.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18.