

"An Owl in the Wilderness"

Here are a couple of Scripture verses. See if you can tell what human emotion this describes. "I am like an owl of the wilderness, like a little owl of the waste places. I lie awake; I am like a lonely bird on the housetop" (Psalm 102:6-7). How about *loneliness*! Feeling all alone.

Consider the imagery the Bible uses here. "An owl of the wilderness" - or as some translations have it, "a desert owl". Picture a wilderness, a desert. Have you ever been in a desert? A few years back Nancy and I drove through parts of Arizona. There were miles and miles of dry, barren desert land. Then it refers to an owl. When's the last time you saw a flock of owls around your house? Landing in trees, sitting on a fence, eating in your yard? When is the last time you saw even *one* owl? Owls are nocturnal animals. The owl is a lonely type bird. An owl in the desert! What a vivid picture of *loneliness*!

The writer also says in verse 7: "I lie awake; I am like a *lonely bird* on the housetop" (Psalm 102:7). Sometimes you see a flock of birds, a number of birds together...chirping away. But occasionally you may see one bird perched right at the top of a bare tree, or on a rooftop. If I see this, sometimes it makes me want to say to the lonely bird, "Hey, what are you doing sitting there all by yourself?"

Do you ever feel like that? Lonely? I remember listening one day to The Morning Chapel Hour on the radio. The speaker, Norm Nelson, told of leading a conference. As he often does at the start of an event, he asked people why they were there. He got the familiar answers from some of the people, but one response left its mark on him. One lady spoke up and said she was there because she was lonely. He said this was a young, very attractive woman. Very outgoing. A professional woman, a trained counselor. She was a lady who seemed to have the looks and personality to command quite a following. But she was willing to share with the group that she was lonely.

Loneliness is a common human experience. Most of us, at one time or another, go through periods when we feel lonely. For some, it is a *chronic feeling* that doesn't go away.

Many elderly people are lonely. Perhaps they are a widow or widower. Maybe living alone in their house, or in an apartment. In days gone by, often 3 generations would live in the same house as an extended family. Now the elderly are often alone, or separated from their family in a nursing home.

Single people can experience loneliness. Perhaps they never married. Maybe they separated or divorced. I was almost 28 years old when I got married. I lived as a single pastor, alone in a parsonage. At times I felt very lonely.

But married people can also feel loneliness. One can't assume that just getting married is a cure for loneliness. It may be - but sometimes, in spite of having a partner, a person doesn't feel emotionally connected to their spouse, and they feel alone most of the time.

Young people can be lonely. Some don't fit in with the crowd, they become "loners". Others seem to have lots of friends, but still deep inside they feel all alone. When I was a very young

pastor I preached a week of youth services at Landisville Camp Meeting. To prepare the topics for my messages I jotted down a number of things I thought might be of interest to the youth. I then ran that list by a youth group. I was a bit surprised to discover that one of the topics the kids were most interested in was "loneliness."

Syndicated columnist George Will had a recent column in the Lancaster newspaper that bore the title: "Loneliness is tearing apart our nation, our people." In that column he refers to a book by Ben Sasse, a U.S. Senator from Nebraska, where Sasse claims loneliness is the number one health problem in our country, and is actually tied to the hateful divide between Republicans and Democrats that we see today. Mr. Sasse argues in his book that Americans are richer, more informed and more "connected" than ever – and unhappier, more isolated, and less fulfilled.

He writes that those in the fields of medicine and sociology are making new discoveries in the effect of loneliness on individuals' brains and bodies, and on communities. "Persistent loneliness reduces average longevity more than twice as much as does heavy drinking and more than three times as much as obesity, which often is a consequence of loneliness. Research demonstrates that loneliness is as *physically* dangerous as smoking 15 cigarettes a day and contributes to cognitive decline, including more rapid advance of Alzheimer's disease."

Sasse says that "there is a growing consensus" that loneliness – not obesity, cancer or heart disease – is the nation's "number one health crisis." And, what is seen as "connectedness" is replacing the real thing. i.e. We are "connected" through smart phones, internet, social media – but lack genuine *social bonding*. He maintains that we are "addicted to distractions" and "parched for genuine community." For instance, check out the number of people, especially younger people, who spend much of their life with their head buried in their smart phone, or spend hours and hours at their computer on social media. It's a fascinating and thought-provoking column.

The psalmist said, "I am like an owl of the wilderness..." (Psalm 102:6). There are other places in the Bible where loneliness is expressed. The writer of Psalm 88:18 cries, "You have taken my companions and loved ones from me; the darkness is my closest friend." What a picturesque description! The Apostle Paul said, "At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me" (2 Timothy 4:16). The Gospel of Mark relates how on the night of Jesus' trial, all His disciples left Him alone: "Then everyone deserted him and fled" (Mark 14:50).

Is there an answer for this human condition of loneliness? Is there any help and hope? I believe there is! Let's think about some of the facets of loneliness, and how we can get help.

There is a kind of loneliness that is related to God. The Bible says that by nature we are sinners – we are estranged from our Creator, separated from God. Because of this, there is a profound sense of isolation – sort of a cosmic loneliness. This is powerfully portrayed in the story of Adam and Eve. They are created by God, and placed in a paradise. There was a oneness and a connection between Adam and Eve and God and the natural world around them. But what happened when they sinned and disobeyed God? *They hid from God. They were alone.*

I once served as the camp director for a week of camp at Pocono Plateau. Toward the end of the week we had the usual "counselor hunt". Along with all of the adult counselors, I chose a place to hide. I climbed way up in a tall tree. The kids couldn't find me. It was fun! From my perch way up in the tree I could hear them below saying, "Where's Rev. Kaufhold?" I sat up there, enjoying the scenery and the view, and I gloated! They couldn't find me! After a while it started to get dark. All the counselors were found. And you know, it wasn't fun anymore. The rest of the camp moved on to the next event. I sat up there – all alone, and apparently forgotten! I felt like that lonely bird in the tree top.

I see this as a parable of how it is when we choose to hide from God, and live without God. We are free to choose what we want, live as we please. We may think we're cool and self-sufficient, but there is this profound isolation from our Creator.

God addressed that innate loneliness of the soul when He sent Jesus into the world! The Bible says Jesus "reconciled" us to God. Jesus brings God and us together again. He overcomes the loneliness and isolation from our Creator caused by our sin. 2 Corinthians 5:18 says, "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ." When we turn from our sins, and receive Christ into our life, we are brought back into a right relationship with God.

But even when this primary loneliness is overcome (our isolation from God), as human beings, we still experience loneliness (even if we are Christians). Many situations in life can cause us to feel lonely: our husband, or wife, or someone else we love dearly, dies; we break up with our boy friend or girl friend or fiancée; we're the only Christian in our shop or office; we move to a new town, new school, or start a new job; we are away from home and we're homesick; we develop an illness, or go through a difficult time, and even though people try to encourage us, we feel nobody understands what we're going through. If this is the case, don't beat up on yourself for feeling lonely, or think that you must not be a very good follower of Jesus. It's just part of being human.

So, how do we find help to overcome feelings of loneliness when they come? The solution is not new...but it's still true! *Loneliness can be overcome by being in relationship, being in community, with God, and with people.* Fulton Sheen was a well known bishop of the Roman Catholic Church. In an essay on loneliness he wrote: "The basic reason for loneliness is that (people) today have divorced themselves from both the love of God and love of neighbor."

Bishop Sheen mentions *the love of God*. For some, our *human feelings* of loneliness can be overcome by our faith in God and having a relationship with Christ. By praying, meditating, reading His Word the loneliness goes away. Being in communion with God really can ease the burden of loneliness!

But frankly, sometimes we need more than just God. We need people! Loving our neighbor. Having meaningful relationships with people can cure loneliness. You've heard it before: *The best way to have a friend is to be a friend.* Be less focused on self. Invest in the lives of others. Take the initiative to reach out and make new friends. I once heard a dear Christian

lady, a widow, say that God had kept her from being lonely. But this lady also was active in her Church, taught school, and loved children. The loneliest people are those who sit around and wait for someone to call, or spend a lot of time feeling sorry for themselves! There are people to be loved, others who need a friend. Reach out and help fill another person's loneliness!

Chad was a quiet little boy, shy. Day after day his mother agonized as she watched the children coming home from school. While they laughed and talked to each other and hung onto each other, Chad always lagged behind – alone. Valentine's Day was approaching, and one day, Chad came home and told his mother he'd like to make valentines for everyone in his class. Her heart sank. It wasn't a good idea, she thought. They never included him in anything. But she decided she'd go along with his wishes. So she bought paper and glue and crayons, and for 3 weeks, night after night, Chad painstakingly made 35 valentines.

Valentine's Day came, and Chad was beside himself with excitement as he went off to school. That afternoon she nervously waited for him to come home. There they were, as usual, kids laughing and having a great time...and Chad, bringing up the rear, all by himself. She couldn't help but notice his arms were empty. It was evident he had gotten no valentines, and she dreaded him coming into the house, probably in tears. She choked back her own tears as he came in the door. "I've put out some cookies for you," she gently said, but he hardly heard her words. He marched right by her and all he could say was, "Not a one. Not a one." But he had a smile on his face! Then he added, "I didn't forget a one, Mom. Not a single one!"

Someday, if Chad is able to maintain that attitude, he won't be so all alone! You want to be less lonely? Fill someone else's loneliness with love!

One final thought: Loneliness is not always a bad thing. ***Sometimes those periods of life when we are forced to be alone, or choose to be alone, can be the most fertile, creative times in our life.*** Jesus, alone in the wilderness at the beginning of His ministry, sorted out what kind of Messiah He was chosen to be. The Apostle Paul, alone in Arabia, reflected on his recent conversion to Christ, and no doubt formed the message he would later share with the world about Jesus. Moses, without human companionship on Mt. Sinai, could be prepared by God to receive the 10 commandments.

When times of loneliness come, while you're going through them, invite God into your loneliness. Allow Him to teach you some important life lesson - or make clearer a direction for your life, or simply reassure you of His constant, abiding love through all the circumstances of your life.

*Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.
Community United Methodist Church
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