

"Loneliness"

Easter VI, RCL-A, Sunday, April 27, 2008

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Not long ago a group of sociologists published a fascinating study on loneliness – you may have seen it in the paper.

Researchers went out, and they interviewed hundreds of people and asked them about their close friends -- they wanted to know how lonely Americans are these days.

Eventually these sociologists reported their results -- and this startling finding:

-One-fourth of all Americans say they had nobody to talk to about "important matters."

-Another one-fourth said they were only one person away from having nobody to talk to

-- that's half the population.

However, what was most disconcerting was that an identical study was done 20 years ago. -- And in just two decades, these researchers found that the number of people with no one to confide in had doubled.

Loneliness and isolation is a growing problem in our society -- perhaps not in this place where one is more likely to get assaulted by hugs, "how ya' doings?" and Deacon Al's famous two-handed handshakes.

For a lot of reasons, we as a society are not connecting with each other like we used to. We're not widening our circles of close friends. -- We're drawing these circles in.

Sure, our fast-paced life-styles and an all-consuming economy take much of the blame.

It is typical to see both spouses working these days -- they have to, to make ends meet -- but this leaves little time to get to know our neighbors.

Today we get 30% less sleep than we did a century ago -- And nearly 50% of us didn't take all of our vacation time last year.

Faced with a shaky economy, threats to our security at home and abroad, and rising commodities prices all around us -- many of us feel like we're on these endless treadmills that keep us up too late and wake us up too early.

Many of us feel like we barely have time for ourselves, much less for the kinds of friendships that nurture and feed our deepest selves.

And that leads to an increase in loneliness -- a sense that there's no one around to share our intimacies, be they dreams or nightmares.

Even though more and more of us are living in big cities -- surrounded by tens of thousands of people -- researchers tell us this is when we can feel the most out of touch -- this is when we can feel the most lonely.

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"Loneliness is not cured by human company," writes the Jesuit Anthony de Mello, -- "It is cured by contact with reality -- dropping one's illusions and making contact with the real."

And this morning, that's what you and I are up to -- as we open, once again, John's Gospel and hear about the new reality of 'God with us' that is at the center of the Christian message.

This morning we hear a word for single people -- and for married people who may feel isolated and that they are on their own.

Jesus defines our reality for us this morning:

- that we are not alone;
- we are very much at the center of God's attentions;
- we have at our disposal a willing conversation partner, an eager advocate, and a consoling comforter available 24/7 -- like the youth group that re-named the Holy Spirit -- they called him Denny because he's open all night.

Just as He was in last week's Gospel reading, this morning Jesus is at the Last Supper table in John 14.

Metaphorically he is giving some death-bed advice -- and that means that it's important advice -- Jesus is departing -- and the Holy Spirit is coming -- Jesus tells us about our new reality:

"I will not leave you orphaned."

The implication is a very profound statement about our own self-worth -- we are worthy of God's constant companionship -- and able to do wondrous things through God's presence with us.

If nothing else, Jesus seems to be saying that he really thinks each one of us is pretty cool.

More than 200 years ago, a man named Thomas Coram sailed his ship into London.

Coram was a successful sea captain -- and after amassing no small fortune and no small amount of prestige, he set about his retirement.

And, as he embarked from his ship anchored on the Thames, he couldn't help but notice the amazing number of abandoned children running through the streets -- orphans -- that were discarded, neglected, and forced to live on their own at incredibly young ages.

That's when Thomas Coram set his mind to do something about it.

In an effort that would take some 20 years to complete -- Coram founded what is regarded by many, as the first incorporated charity -- the Foundling Hospital, set up for 'the maintenance and education of exposed and deserted young children'.

Coram's passion, like the Bible's, was orphans.

Psalm 109:10 tells us of the orphan's peril, "They shelter in ruins by night, and they wander about and beg, by day."

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Job 24 tells us that they are routinely at the mercy of thugs.

Together with the widows, Deuteronomy 27 tells us they are entitled to justice -- they were allowed to gather the sheaves, the olives and the grapes remaining after the harvest. (John Pridmore)

In theory and in Old Testament law, orphans were to be looked after. -- But in reality, their situation remained precarious.

The fact that the prophets Zechariah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah had to take up their cause tells us that orphans continued to be victims of neglect and exploitation.

And so despite the best work of philanthropists and prophets, human society has always had its orphans -- And you and I are not immune to their plight.

Let me ask a few personal questions here-

How often have any of you young people felt the neglect of being the last one chosen for the pick-up basketball game -- and can any of us older people still, vividly remember times on the playground like these?

Have we ever felt the pain of a birthday gone by without enough people, or the right people, or anyone, noticing?

Have we ever complained, or heard the complaint, of being ill and no one calling on me?

This painful social isolation can make us distraught, or worse.

At times like these, we can't help but wonder why we feel this way.

What role do other people play in my own personal fulfillment?

Should it be up to others to make me happy?

Why do I care so much about what other people think, that I'll let my day be ruined by their opinion?

Last weekend Manju Freeman, who led our Cultural Sunday festivities, pointed out that Africans often sing while they're working in the fields -- and he taught us a song that's often sung by West African workers as they're doing the planting and harvesting.

Men, women, children, we were told, they all sing while they work.

But you don't find much of that in modern American culture -- Today's plugged-in, ipod generation is much more bashful and intimidated.

Having been re-programmed by an American Idol culture that puts our ultimate self-worth up for judgment before a caustic panel of nay-sayers -- who would want to open their mouths if anything shy of Jessica Simpson or Josh Groban's voices were to come out?

Ya, we're worried about what other people think -- we're terrified of having our own William Hung moment.

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Our craving for love and acceptance -- and fear of rejection and isolation -- often stifles us and keeps us from taking the risks, from speaking out, and being the prophetic witnesses we want to be.

How often we fail to plant in our hearts the only opinion that really matters.

It is the opinion of the one who has already told us we are loved, accepted and regarded as the apple of His eye.

The reality that Jesus deals with this morning has to do not simply with God's awareness of our situation -- but of our own awareness of God's situation -- God's presence with us.

For we all know the promise of this verse:

-that the Holy Spirit is with us, right now, in our pew, on our minds, in our hearts-

And yet we don't really believe it, do we?

-otherwise, why would other people's opinions matter so much?

Why would we feel so abandoned -- when we're not?

I am so looking forward to the day when impressing other people and having people say nice things about me doesn't matter a lick.

I am so looking forward to the day when I can believe deep down that God really loves me for who I am -- not who I'm going to be, or who I mean to be, or who I want to be -- but for who I really am.

I am so looking forward to the day when God's opinion of me -- as forgiven, loved and as one of God's beloved and cared for takes the day.

This morning, Jesus' words are aimed at chiding us to ask questions about our own abandonment issues -- which always leads to questions about our own self-worth.

Sure, loneliness has its biological underpinnings.

Many of us remember the stories that came out of Romania after the orphanages were opened up in the 1990's -- and the large number of children who had been herded into and raised in these places and never given adequate adult bonding -- many of them were never held as babies -- And as they grew up, their weird and anti-social behavior blossomed.

We know that intimate touch, care, and attention is integral to the health and well-being of little ones -- parents are extending the loving hands of God to them.

If this isn't experienced in childhood, the results can be devastating.

Some of us may be feeling them this morning.

But as we get older, for most of us, this changes. -- Our minds develop, we grow up.

We can address our intimacies from more cerebral understandings -- we can address the neglect and abandonment issues we all have from a much more informed and mature point of view.

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And we can begin to deal with the roots of our insecurities and self-worth issues -- which is what Jesus is doing in his promise of eternal presence.

And Jesus uses this rather odd word – it's the Advocate. -- In Greek, this word is Paraclete.

To answer a question from some of you bird lovers -- No, Paraclete does not refer to a bright yellow song bird.

To answer a question from Eric and Nathaniel and some of our other jocks -- No, Paraclete does not refer to the shoes worn on a football pitch or in track and field endeavors.

No, Paraclete has a wide range of meanings -- and we do well to hear them.

The Paraclete is our advocate who sticks up for us and helps us make our petitions known before God.

The Paraclete is a comforter who is there for us when times are tough.

And perhaps most importantly, the Paraclete abides in us.

The text says, "You will know him because he abides with you and he will be in you."

In this way it has been argued that you and I are the fourth members of the Trinity.

Because of our one-ness with the Spirit -- you and I don't simply stand close admiring the majesty of the Trinity -- in some ways, we seem to become an equal part of it.

John's language here doesn't suggest that you and I 'imitate' Jesus so much as we fully participate in him.

"On that day you will know that I am in the Father and you in me, and I in you."

I know it sounds heretical -- but if we are to take the text as it reads, that's the impression we get.

We are an integral part of God's team

And it is with this understanding that we begin to ask questions that can liberate us from our own self-limiting.

Why are we so uncomfortable with our aloneness? -- Why is the approval of others so important?

In what ways might our understanding of Christ's real presence with us and in us empower us to be the people we are called to be?

There once was an archer whose aim was perfect. -- He could split an apple down the middle from 50 paces.

He was the best archer in the land and he knew it.

Then one day an enemy from another town challenged him to a contest.

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The best target shooter would be rewarded with a brass ring.

Several people from the enemy's town came to the competition -- And as it got underway the crowd gathered round and offered jeers and taunts.

The archer began to sweat and grow nervous. -- But after several rounds he held it together and won.

The next week another enemy from another town challenged the archer.

This time the prize would be a priceless gold cup.

This time, a huge crowd from the enemy's town showed up.

And in the first round of the competition -- with all those people and all that jeering piled so high -- the archer began to shudder... and see double.

As the taunts became louder and more crude, the archer missed every target, and went home humiliated -- and without the gold cup.

What had changed?

His bow was the same. -- His arrows were the same. -- The target was still at 50 paces.

However, the archer's awareness of himself had faltered.

He no longer acted like the archer he knew he was -- He allowed the opinions of others to tell him who he was.

And he started to believe what others said, over what he knew was true.

Jesus Christ has called you and me higher things than simply good marksmanship.

Jesus puts you and me on par, in the heavenly realm, as a people called and commissioned to play roles in this life that only we can play.

As we go through the week ahead, let us think about the ways we allow the opinions of others to hold sway over God's opinion.

Let us meditate upon the God, whose Spirit dwells within us, to define who we are and whose we are.

Let us remember that we are in no wise abandoned or uncared for because our God practically includes us in the Trinity.

This, my friends, is eternal life, that we can know God -- and that this God can be with us always -- and that this knowledge empowers us to hit the bull's eye and take home the gold cup every single time.

Amen.