



THE SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
 PHYSICAL DISTANCING
 May 17, 2020
 North Congregational Church
 New Hartford, Connecticut

WORSHIP ON THE TENTH TIME
 THAT WE ARE NOT GATHERING IN OUR SANCTUARY
 BECAUSE WE WISH TO HONOR THE GOVERNOR'S REQUEST FOR
 PHYSICAL DISTANCING IN ORDER TO PREVENT THE SPREAD
 OF THE CORONAVIRUS THAT IS TRAVELING AROUND THE GLOBE

FOR YOUR MEDITATION

*Sometimes God thrusts us out of the crowd into a solitude we did not desire, but which nonetheless takes hold of us.... In these moments of solitude, something is done to us. The centre of our being, the innermost self that is the ground of our aloneness, is elevated to the divine centre and taken into it. Therein can we rest without losing ourselves. Now perhaps we can answer a question you may have already asked: "How can communion grow out of solitude?" We have seen that we can never reach the innermost centre of another being. We are always alone, each for himself. But we can reach it in a movement that rises first to God and then returns from him to the other self. In this way, a person's aloneness is not removed, but taken into the community with that in which the centres of all beings rest and so into community with all of them. Even love is reborn in solitude. For only in solitude are those who are alone able to reach those from whom they are separated. Only the presence of the eternal can break through the walls that isolate the temporal from the temporal. One hour of solitude may bring us closer to those we love than many hours of communication. -Paul Tillich (1886-1965) from *The Eternal Now**

THE PEACE OF CHRIST It is normally our custom when we gather to extend the Peace of Christ to one another. Even though we are physically apart at this time, may you know that peace.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION

As our period of physical distancing continues, we gather in our homes for worship by ourselves or with loved ones. Some of us are more comfortable being alone than others, but we all long for our beloved community in the sanctuary we love, and we are lonely for the company of our fellow Christians. Surround us with your presence, O God, and bring us closer to your will. Enable us to use this time to deepen our relationship with you. Inspire us to reach out to one another, even though we are physically apart.. Amen.

OPENING HYMN

I Need Thee Every Hour

Tune: NEED

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XO-I8XgU5ac>

SCRIPTURE LESSONS

Genesis 2: 4a-7, 18-22

These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created. In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground— then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being....

Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner.

So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.

Matthew 14: 13-23

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he

went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children. Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone.

MEDITATION "Physically Distanced: Alone, Lonely, Connected"

The Rev. Marcia Lynn Cox

How are you doing in the midst of this physical isolation, or perhaps social isolation, that we are all being asked to maintain? Surely, those of us who are well and are not suffering from the terrible COVID 19 virus are grateful and our hearts go out to all who are themselves ill, or who have lost their lives or are walking with a loved one with the disease or have lost someone to it.

But today I'd like to reflect on solitude and loneliness: their challenges and their virtues.

To begin, it seems to me that there is a difference between solitude and loneliness. One can be alone and perfectly content.

This past week I had a short phone conversation with the husband of a cousin, a college professor, who observed that his life hasn't changed much at all. He's glued to his research and writing, and could barely spend more than ten minutes speaking to me. A young woman from Colorado writes of similar feelings in an article this week in the *New York Times*:

"When my employer announced office-wide telework, I was privately, quietly giddy. The pain of my partner's death is not as sharp as it once was, but what hasn't changed is my hunger for solitude and an ache for societal approval of it. Please don't suggest a happy hour. Please don't invite me to your birthday party. Please don't ask if I would like to join you for a walk around the lake. Because I don't feel like it, but also, I don't want to have to explain why.

I knew it was selfish to feel glad when the stay-at-home orders came in. I knew millions were already affected. But inside my room, in my own little grieving heart, I was relieved. I was at last released from the gatherings that demanded I bring myself when I had no self to bring.

I'm living alone and I love it. I'm eating more Oreos than ever, but I'm also doing healthier things. I ride my bike. I bake lemon coconut cake. I write letters to friends I haven't seen in years. I play my cello. I reach out to my neighbors, my family and my friends when I want to. And all the while, I rejoice in the permission to keep to myself, to move around in my own heart, to remain in sweet, sweet isolation." — Erin Agee, 36, Boulder, Colorado ("Please Don't Suggest a Happy Hour," *Alone*, New York Times, May 13, 2020)

Even I have, I must admit, enjoyed some things about this forced isolation. There are no end to the projects that need attending, books I've been wanting to read and dare I admit it, having the opportunity to do absolutely nothing. But, self-sufficient as I am, this period is wearing on me from time to time. I am lonely for the company of other people. And, since I'm single, the opportunity to just reach out and touch someone on the arm or shoulder or...dare I say...(aware of the problems a certain political candidate has been having recently)... give a hug.

If you've lived long enough, you probably have observed that all of us have a different needs for alone time and togetherness.

Some people can't imagine being by themselves for long at all, while others seem to crave this state of being.

If our desires for connection are dramatically out of sync in a marriage, for example, troubles are sure to ensue. One person will feel unloved, while the other will feel smothered. This is why pastors, if they are able, will give the Myers-Briggs personality inventory to engaged couples they are counseling.

If you are not familiar with this personality inventory there are four categories in which one can be evaluated.

The most well-known category is the introvert-extrovert scale.

In common understanding, an extrovert is a person who is outgoing and friendly, while an introvert is someone who is shy or keeps to herself.

In Myers Briggs language, the difference is explained in a slightly different way.

An extrovert is defined as someone who derives their energy from from interactions with people, while an introvert tends to be more inner- directed.

Extroverts tend to think out loud, while introverts are more inclined to process concepts and issues internally. Neither approach is right or wrong.

Extroverts, I'm guessing, probably see introverts as lonely people while introverts really treasure time for reading, contemplation and projects that they engage in alone. For an introvert, loneliness and aloneness are two different states of being.

One of the long time associate pastors at our sister church in West Hartford, Henry Milan, now retired, was telling a clergy group one day that he tested on Myers-Briggs as an introvert.

I expressed my surprise, because Henry is very gregarious and engaging. I found his answer helpful, because I test toward introvertism.

He said that he's interested in so many things and wants to talk about them.

So he finds that he derives a great deal of energy when he's in the company of other intelligent and interesting people.

So, contrary to popular understanding, introverts are very very sociable, when they are with the right group of people.

Loneliness can come over us, whether we are introverts or extroverts. The experience of loneliness varies from individual. Simply put: Our well being suffers when our particular need for connection has not been met.

What is loneliness, really?

It can be the result of being physical absent from people but more profoundly is the inability to share anything that matters with anyone else.

If I'm an opera lover, but am in a room filled with people talking about the Super Bowl, I'm going to feel lonely. If I want to participate fully in a community, but find that I'm ignored, or that my ideas are dismissed, I will feel rejected.

If I am a teacher and passionate about my subject matter, but am forced to be in a classroom of students who are text messaging and giggling, I will feel isolated...another word for lonely.

In our Hebrew bible lesson this morning, the second story of creation in Genesis, God creates a woman to be a companion (notice I didn't say "helper") for a man because, as scripture tells us, God thinks that "It is not good for man to be alone."

If you remember the first creation story in Genesis, God pronounced all of his creation good.

As John Milton, the 17th century English poet wrote, "Loneliness is the first thing which God's eye named, not good."

Feelings of isolation and loneliness have significant and unhappy consequences. In their book, “Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection,” psychologists John Cacioppo and William Patrick make a number of interesting observations.

When researchers on loneliness have done an MRI of brains, they have discovered that the emotional region of the brain that is activated when we experience rejection is the same region that registers emotional responses to physical pain.

Loneliness HURTS!

Our authors also observe that feeling isolated can undermine our ability to think clearly. When we are persistently lonely, they write, we can misinterpret the cues that people send us. We will be overly sensitive and our interpretations of their thoughts or intentions may be less than accurate.

We turn small errors into catastrophes and this contributes to greater isolation.

This can lead to divorces and estrangements, more run-ins with neighbors.

And as time goes by we become more and more wary of people.

When we are lonely, the authors say, we react more negatively to the negatives in life; we also experience less of a soothing uplift from the positives.

Loneliness, sadly, has a way spiraling downward.

And when we feel isolated, we often turn to substance abuse and over-eating to ease our pain.

This week the United Nations reported that “a mental illness crisis is looming as millions of people worldwide are surrounded by death and disease and forced into isolation, poverty and anxiety by the pandemic of COVID-19.

The isolation, the fear, the uncertainty, the economic turmoil - they all cause or could cause psychological distress,” said Devora Kestel, director of the World Health Organization’s (WHO) mental health department....

“The mental health and wellbeing of whole societies have been severely impacted by this crisis and are a priority to be addressed urgently,” she told reporters at a briefing.

The report highlighted several regions and sections of societies as vulnerable to mental distress - including children and young people isolated from friends and school, healthcare workers who are seeing thousands of patients infected with and dying from the new coronavirus. Emerging studies and surveys are already showing COVID-19’s impact on mental health globally. Psychologists say children are anxious and increases in cases of depression and anxiety have been recorded in several countries.

Domestic violence is rising, and health workers are reporting an increased need for psychological support. Reuters last week reported from interviews with doctors and nurses in the United States who said either they or their colleagues had experienced a combination of panic, anxiety, grief, numbness, irritability, insomnia and nightmares.

Outside of the health sector, the WHO report said many people are distressed by the immediate health impacts and the consequences of physical isolation, while many others are afraid of infection, dying, and losing family members.

Millions of people are facing economic turmoil, having lost or being at risk of losing their income and livelihoods, it added. And frequent misinformation and rumours about the pandemic and deep uncertainty about how long it will last are making people feel anxious and hopeless about the future.”

(reported by Kate Kelland, edited by William Maclean, “U.N. warns of global mental health crisis due to COVID-19 pandemic,” Reuters, May 14, 2020)

So, those of us who are faring relatively well will need to watch out for our family members, friends and neighbors, especially during this time, who are feeling painfully lonely. And those of us who are in pain, I so hope, will not hesitate to turn to others for help, if only to talk.

But loneliness, as we’ve observed, is not necessarily synonymous with being alone. And we are self-reflective, we can make good use of our time alone.

The gospel lesson that I chose this morning tells us of Jesus spending time with people and taking time for prayer and reflection.

In our passage, Jesus has been told of the beheading of John the Baptist.

It is not surprising that he wants to be by himself after hearing of the brutal death of his cousin.

Just as he has settled in to reflect and be with God he is summoned by his disciples who tell him that there are 5,000 hungry people who need spiritual sustenance and will need to be physically fed as well. Jesus, of course, responds.

After this exhausting day, Jesus sends his disciples back to their boat and, once again, seeks solitude. We didn’t read the verses that follow, but he hears the disciples calling out to him to, as they are being tossed to and fro in a storm.

Again, he immediately answers their call and calms their fears.

Jesus’ life speaks to our experiences, or at least it should. Because, at its best, life is an exercise in action/reflection. Much of the time, we are engaged with people.

But there are also times when we need to reflect on those experiences...to bring them before God.... to just simply be still in God's presence. It seems to me that in life we need a healthy balance between being by ourselves and being with other people. If we have too much time alone, we are sure to find ourselves lonely and cut off from people.

But if we never spend time alone, with God, to reflect, never look over our day or our relationships with people and hold them up to God and the teachings of Jesus, then we will continue to make the same mistakes over and over again, and will sure to be rejected, isolated, lonely.

Since bullying in our schools has grown more prevalent, it has become an important topic of conversation in the past few years.

Some studies have indicated that the young people who are the most likely targets of bullying are the ones with the fewest friends.

Both physically and psychologically, we're safer and have a greater sense of well-being when we are socially connected.

And, as the authors of our book on loneliness write, when we are accepted and invited to be meaningfully engaged with other people, the absence of social pain and the sense of threat allow us to be truly present, in sync with others (p. 18) and, I would add, fully able to serve God in the world.

As Christians, we are part of the body of Christ, which gives us a purpose larger than ourselves. Our time alone, in meditation and reflection, strengthens our bonds with God and with one another. In community, we have the ability to invite and inspire one another work together for the common good. And there is no better prescription from the pain of loneliness.

So, what to do during this period of physical distancing? If we need physical contact, hug our loved ones, our pets, engage in safe sensual pleasures. Now that weather more pleasant, the world outside offers us so much beauty. And if we are missing good conversation, we can call friends: old or new, near or far. I've been so pleased by the people with whom I have re-connected. Send a note. Do a good deed, at a safe distance. And listen, really listen. But we can also take the opportunity to pray more deeply and sincerely. Be honest with God and ourselves: give thanks, dream, ask, confess, cry. Most importantly, as members of the body of Christ, know that you can reach out to the people here with whom you have made a connection. And please, please, don't hesitate to write or call me if you are feeling the need to talk.

In the name of Christ Jesus, who loved both people and treasured his time for deep, meaningful reflection with God. AMEN.

MUSICAL REFLECTION

Virtual International Choir for the Pandemic: *You'll Never Walk Alone*

Rogers and Hammerstein

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6gpoJNv5dlQ>

PRAYER

In our solitude, we are mindful of Jesus, O God
who reserved for himself many moments to reflect.
and departed for solitary places,
withdrawing into the wilderness or up onto a mountain
in loneliness, to talk with to God.

We too can pray in seclusion,
coming to know God more intimately.
May we welcome such solitary moments,
experiencing deep peace,
and receiving inspiration and direction.

(© Catholic Doors Ministry, very loosely adapted)

May these times in which we are alone bring us closer to God and enable us to feel a deeper connection to, and respect and compassion love for, our fellow creatures.

In this spirit we are mindful, of all who are suffering from diseases of the body, the mind and the spirit...

For those who are preparing for medical procedures....

For those who care for the sick and the dying....

For those people facing death

For all who have passed into care and for family and friends who mourn their loss.....

In our own lives, we bring to you now our joys and concerns....

All these things we offer, using the words of the prayer that Jesus taught us,

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

OFFERING

Although we are not gathering in the sanctuary for worship on Sundays for the time being, the church continues to have expenses. So it would be most appreciated if pledges and offerings could be mailed to the church at P.O. Box 307, New Hartford, CT 06057. Thank you for your generosity.

CLOSING HYMN *God Be With You Til We Meet Again.* Tune: GOD BE WITH YOU

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EsgjbpxLdTc>

OUR COMMON COMMISSION

Let us now forth into the world in peace.

Being of good courage.

Holding fast to that which is good.

Rendering to no one evil for evil.

Strengthening the fainthearted.

Supporting the weak.

Helping the afflicted.

Honoring all persons.

Loving and serving the Lord,

And rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

BENEDICTION

In isolation, in solitude, may we be grateful for the opportunity to turn our thoughts inward, and more deeply attune ourselves to the heart and mind of God. But at the same time, although we may not be able to visit or hug, may we reach out. Let us be bold: Take chances: send texts or an email, write notes, make phone calls. Offer words of encouragement. Express our love and appreciation to as many people we can, in as many ways that we can. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

POSTLUDE

We Are Not Alone

Pepper

Chopin

Oasis Chorale

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OviilwuJVtE>