

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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SERMON: *Loneliness*

SERIES: *Pursuing Wholeness*

SCRIPTURES:

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DATE: **2023 – 8 - 13**

**Credit to Bible Gateway; Scott Scruggs; Abby Odio; John Ortberg; Craig Groeschel*

KENTUCKY MISSIONS PRESENTATIONS

Well good morning and welcome to Five Forks Church, to everyone here in the room and also to those of you tuning in to the livestream.

*I recently heard a story about a phone call (**PIC OF TWO LADIES ON PHONE**) that happened in Blackpool, England. The call was made by an elderly lady named Cheryl and the person who answered the phone was a person named Allison. On the call Cheryl did most of the talking. Mostly small talk. She was talking about the weather and how spring had come earlier that year, casual conversation. Until she mentioned that just the week earlier she had turned 81 years old. And Allison responded by say, “Wow, that’s an amazing accomplishment. Who did you celebrate with?” And there was a long pause and Cheryl said, “No one.” And there was another long pause. And Cheryl said, “I was alone on my birthday.” And there was another long pause. And Cheryl went on to say that she had been alone before her birthday and since her birthday and that really she hadn’t spoken to another person in several weeks, until right now.*

What’s interesting about the call, is that Allison was not a friend or a family member. Cheryl had called something called the silver line...again this is in the UK. It’s a call center for people who need someone to talk to. People will call just to be able to talk

*about their day or something from their past or something they're looking forward to. And the founder of this call center said, they're all looking for this one thing: **connection.** Just connection with other people.*

*So any guesses on how many calls this one little call center receives in a given week?
10,000 calls! (Scott Scruggs)*

What that hints to us, is that we are living in a world filled with lonely people.

Perhaps you've been one of those people. You have had that feeling of *"I'm all alone. I have no one to talk to. I'm don't have a place to belong...a place to be loved...people to notice me."* That's loneliness.

According to a Harvard University study 1 in 3 people endure ongoing feelings of loneliness and isolation.

33% of people have hurts to share and no one to listen.

A need in life and no one to meet that need.

They have love to give and no one to receive it.

(Groeschel)

Mother Theresa once said, **"Loneliness is like the leprosy of our day"**.

"People will readily acknowledge being too busy because that makes them sound important," he says. "But to say 'I'm lonely' is kind of like saying 'I'm a loser,' and nobody's going to like a loser." (Ortberg)

One of the most disturbing thoughts as a human being is thought of being all alone. Turning 81 but with no one to celebrate or talk to.

Today we're stepping into the fourth week of our series called **"Pursuing wholeness"**. We're taking several weeks to address this important conversation about our faith and mental health. To be whole means finding wholeness in our spirituality, in our physical body and also in our mental health.

So today, let's just talk a little bit about the experience of loneliness. Once again, for the fourth week in a row, if you have your Bible turn to **1 Kings 19**. Through this series we've been unpacking the mental health battle that Elijah, one of God's hero prophets walked through. By now you are hopefully becoming familiar with this passage. We've been reading it every week and just peeling back various layers of Elijah's struggle.

Let's begin by finding the experience of loneliness in Elijah's story.

I. Elijah and loneliness

³ Elijah was afraid^[a] and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, ⁴ while he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness.

So, again, right here at the outset of his story we catch a glimpse of Elijah's loneliness. We're told that he leaves his servant behind, while he himself heads into the wilderness, all alone. He is choosing to isolate himself, to walk away from people and community and connections. One of the causes of loneliness in our lives is physical isolation. Not having other people around. And it seems we find some of this in Elijah's story.

Though it is important to point out, there is a difference between **being alone** and **feeling lonely**.

You can be all alone and not actually feel lonely. Any introverts in the room today. Yeah, many of us in here can appreciate alone times. I enjoy running and I enjoy running all by myself, and often when I run by myself I don't use earbuds or play music...I like the quiet, aloneness.

At the same time, you can be in crowd of people and still feel lonely. Out of place, no friends, no meaningful connection. In fact, sometimes that kind of loneliness can be the most troubling. Because you can see others enjoying the gift of relationship and fellowship and you feel your own isolation more keenly.

But certainly Elijah seems to be physically isolating himself.

After this angel shows up, feeds him, encourages him to get some rest. And then he travels 40 days further into the wilderness, further isolating himself. Where God meets him and says Elijah what are you doing here? And now look at verse 10.

¹⁰ He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."

It's that short little phrase at the end of verse 10 that is such painful language...and really gets to the heart of loneliness.

I am the only one left.

I'm the only one experiencing this. Nobody else understands. Nobody else even knows. I'm the only one. He is feeling disconnected, misunderstood...and that is the disturbing experience of loneliness.

Some of you in here you've felt that, haven't you?

Maybe you're single and you've had that sense of longing to share your life with someone else but it hasn't happened for you yet.

Maybe you're married but there has been a growing distance between you and your spouse.

Maybe you're empty-nesters. Your kids have reached college age and they are leaving the house and that once loud and vibrant house has gone quiet.

Maybe you've recently moved...and you've moved into Franklin County, PA and it's been hard to make friends. Or you're a little younger, you moved schools and now there are new teachers, new peers...you feel alone.

Maybe you're in a leadership position at work or in your community and you feel isolated. Sometimes being in leadership can give you that sense of loneliness.

Some of you have lost a loved one...spouse, a close friend...and it's left an empty place at your table and a hole in your heart. It's a hole filled with the pain of loneliness.

I think Elijah's feeling that. "I am the only one left."

And if you've felt that before, you know that loneliness can be an extremely painful experience.

There was a study done by UCLA that showed that the feelings of loneliness, generate the same neurological response in your brain as physical pain. In other words, on a brain level loneliness can feel just like being punched in the face.

And what we do so often do when we experience that kind of pain in our lives...we run away. We want to go hide in a cave. Or some of us we've tried filling that void of loneliness using all kinds of things: buying new things, eating food, getting lost in social media world, alcoholism, drugs...

So again, let's just unpack this a little bit...

Part of the reason that loneliness hurts so bad is that we were

A. Created for community.

You know sometimes when it comes to loneliness as with many of these other mental health struggles, we can be pretty hard on ourselves and we begin to think there is something broken or wrong about us. Loneliness can do that to us. So, it's important to know that when you feel loneliness it's not because there's something wrong with you, it's actually because there's something right with you.

When you go all the way back to the beginning of your Bible, when God was creating the world, the universe, and everything in it. And the whole way along as God creates, he says **"and it was good."** You find this phrase over and over again. "It was good, it was good." Until something surprising happens.

Sin has not yet entered the world. Humans have not yet disobeyed God. There's no evil. No, injustice. There is nothing wrong with the world. Which is why it's so surprising when God says, **"It is not good..."** It is not good... It makes you wonder, "What's not good before evil and sin had entered the world?" **"It's not good for humans to be alone."**

We were created for connection.

I need people in my life who know that Shaun's favorite past time is running. Shaun's favorite color is blue. Shaun's favorite outfit is shorts and a t-shirt. Shaun's favorite thing to read is theology. Shaun's favorite desert is a warm chocolate volcano cake with a mound of vanilla ice cream. Shaun's favorite music is country music.

I need people who know and who won't judge me for that! And so do you.

To know and to be known...intimately and personally is perhaps the greatest human need. To know that you belong. That if you are not here, someone will notice!

“Call it a clan, call it a tribe, call it a network, call it a family...whatever you call it, whoever you are, you need one...” (Ortberg)

Modern research on loneliness only seems to confirm this Biblical reality. Numerous studies show that loneliness can be linked to all kinds of other health problems including heart disease, high blood pressure, anxiety, shame, depression.

One research article goes so far as to say that *“extreme loneliness or social isolation has the same impact on your mortality as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.”*

You were created for connectedness to other people.

So, what do you do with the loneliness in your life?

First, of all just want to reiterate what I've been saying throughout the series. When it comes to dealing with any of these aspects of our mental health...our physical health and listening to health care professionals is a crucial first step.

So starting with our diet and appropriate rest and sleep patterns, exercise, talking to your doctor or therapist or taking appropriate medicine...all may be part of the healing process. So, what I'm about to include, does not replace any of those things, right? But building off of those as we think about confronting the loneliness we experience...we need to be intentional about:

B. Forming a few deep, connected relationships.

Building and nurturing genuine connections with others is an irreplaceable part of combating loneliness. So here are a couple of just really practical suggestions:

1. Start with conversation.

In our world, that is filled with distractions and busyness and so much communication that is done by technology and that is impersonal, digital and mostly quick sound bites we often overlook the profound importance of personal face to face interactions with others.

I suspect many of us have this experience...we look around the room on a Sunday, there are people we don't know sitting near us. We see them just about every week. But we don't know each other's names. We've never had a conversation.

I'll tell you what is comfortable, even for me. You look for the people who are familiar and you stick with that group. And so we never make deeper connections with our church family.

What if there is someone in this room today, an individual, maybe a couple, maybe a family...in here, in this room, right now...who is experiencing loneliness. They need connection. So, try it...have a conversation with someone here at church. And you could be a part of filling that emptiness, if you would have the courage to introduce yourself to someone you don't know and have a simple conversation.

And look I know, we can't all be good friends with everyone. It's not possible. Sometimes, people can be unrealistic about this. In a church of our size you will not be friends with everyone and that's ok. But you could have a conversation. You could learn some names. You could be that word of encouragement that someone else needs.

And this leads directly into the next step of developing deeper relationships, you have to be willing to...

2. Be vulnerable

Vulnerability is at the heart of genuine relationships. Many of us put up walls or keep people at arm's distance. We're not sure we want people to get too close and find out who we really are. And then in the process we end up with many superficial or surface relationships that aren't very deep.

The Apostle Paul provides helpful example of this, he has this really vulnerable moment in [Romans 7:18-19](#) - **For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.**

That's a pretty vulnerable thing to say, when you're actually writing the Bible, isn't it?

So if you're feeling lonely, here's a good question to ask yourself: **Who are you allowing to see the real you?**

When we allow ourselves to be vulnerable with other people it opens the door for intimacy and connection to happen. And again, you can't, you shouldn't be vulnerable with everyone. But you need people in your life with whom you can be.

Third,

3. Share a meal.

So much of our human connection happens over meals and food. Think about it, as a family, at the dinner table, we talk about the good and the bad that happened today. At school and work. Experiences that happened. People we are or aren't getting along with. How we're feeling.

We celebrate life and holidays and birthday parties and weddings and dates with meals. Because we know that food builds relationships.

This was in fact the example of the early church.

Acts 2:46 - ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together...They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts,

One of the core symbols of our unity as followers of Jesus is a meal. The bread and cup that we share during communion.

I was reading about one study that tracked the lives of seven thousand people over nine years. “Researchers found that the most isolated people were three times more likely to die than those with strong relational connections. People who had bad health habits (such as smoking, poor eating habits, obesity, or alcohol use) but strong social ties lived significantly longer than people who had great health habits but were isolated.”

What this means in simple terms is that *it’s better to eat donuts with friends than to eat broccoli alone.* (Ortberg)

Feeling alone? Start by sharing a meal with someone.

4. Share an experience

Our connectedness to other people is often based on shared experiences.

I mentioned earlier that I love to run and often run by myself because it refuels me and I don’t mind being alone. But once a week I get together with three other guys and we share the experience together. These are three guys have become three of my good friends. Because shared experiences foster deeper relationship and connection.

Playing board games.

Going for a hike.

Riding bikes

Taking a trip to the zoo.

Going to the movies.

As a church, this has been the heart behind some of our “all-church events” scheduled throughout the year.

Going to the Frederick Keys baseball game, just last week. The Five Forks 5K coming up in October. The Church Christmas Dinners. These are opportunities for shared experiences that we hope can be used to develop deeper relationships.

And if you don't know where to begin...I do think it can...

5. Start at Church

We talk often about what is important in order to be a healthy thriving church. We could talk about the sermons or the worship time. We could measure numbers. How many people got saved this past year? How many people got baptized this past year? Are there more people attending on average? Is the budget growing?

And there are important conversations to be had about those aspects of church and what they tell us. But when it really comes down to it, I think that what makes the church, the church is shared community because of our common desire to follow Jesus.

Here's the description of church from...

Acts 2 - ⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship,

A connectedness to one another that is rooted in knowing, loving and following Jesus. And so one possible option to consider is to...

Start a life-group

A life group is just a small group of people who get together regularly/consistently outside of church to be friends. To do all the things I mentioned earlier. To share meals and conversation and experiences.

And I know, this can be a difficult conversation to have. Life groups in churches can be a big challenge. Everyone is so busy. In my 13 years on staff here at Five Forks, there have been attempts at starting life group ministry and it is just really challenging.

And so my point is not to just add one more thing to your already busy schedule. This is not some kind of guilt trip about how everyone needs to be involved in a life group. But if you are feeling lonely and needing more connection in your life. This might be a starting point.

If this is something you'd like to consider or explore. Please let me know. Send me an email this week. I'm interested to know who out there is looking for and wanting something like this and can we help you to get connected.

So you were created for community and the place to begin is by being intentional about forming some deep, connected relationships.

Here's one final thought related to our loneliness...it's worth consider and acknowledging the spiritual aspect associated with our loneliness.

C. Jesus understands our loneliness.

Near the end of his life, when he was betrayed and then arrested...his friends abandoned him. Gospel writer Mark says it like this...**Then everyone deserted him and fled.**

In that moment Jesus must have felt what Elijah felt, what you and I sometimes feel in our own lives. "I'm the only one left."

If not in that moment, then surely after he was beaten and humiliated and nailed to the cross...those painful words he cried out, **“My God, My God why have you forsaken me.”** I think what he felt was “I am the only one left. I am all alone.”

For me, that’s a reminder that Jesus took loneliness to the cross.

Jesus shared in the same experience that we feel. He knows and he understands. And that shared experience opens the door for a deep and connected relationship with him.

More than anything, our loneliness makes us feel disconnected and isolated and alone. Just like Elijah, we begin to wonder, does anyone know or understand or care? Would anyone come looking for us?

And I just love in the story, how God chases after Elijah. As far as Elijah runs into the wilderness...God runs after him.

The Gospel writer John writes, **“In the beginning was the word and the word was God and the word became flesh and lived among us...”** In other words...

God wanted to be with us—so badly, that he sent his son to live as a human being. God took on flesh and shared every human experience.

That cross reminds us that God knows we’ve gone missing (**PIC OF LAMB**). But he will not abandon us, he will not leave us alone, but he comes looking for us. He went looking for Elijah in that desert wilderness and he will come looking for you.

So in those moments when the loneliness hits hard and you begin to wonder if you are the only one left and if you are all alone...you are not...you truly are not...Jesus is there. He will come looking and meet you in your loneliness.