

“The Lonely”

Have you ever felt like a third wheel? Life on the outside of the “in” crowd can make it difficult to fit in, to feel “at home.” The Gospel of **Luke** chronicles Jesus’ ministry with those on the so-called “outside.” During this **“The Outsiders” Worship Series**, we are seeking to be empowered to answer the question, **“What can we learn from these stories and Jesus’ call to turn the inside out and the outside in?”**

Today’s theme is **“The Lonely”**. As I began thinking about this theme, I recalled part of the lyrics from The Beatles’ hit, **“Eleanor Rigby”**. In what I refer to as the refrain, the lyrics repeatedly included these words:

“All the lonely people

Where do they all come from?

All the lonely people

Where do they all belong?” (Songwriters: John Lennon / Paul McCartney of the “Eleanor Rigby” lyrics © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC)

Does anyone remember those words? The lyrics shared a fictitious example of loneliness by telling the sad story of Eleanor Rigby and how it came to pass that the only person who was present for her funeral was the Officiate, Father McKenzie.

“Where do they all belong?”

The last of the funerals in El Paso for the victims of the recent mass murders was on Friday. I heard a report about it on my car radio. It was for a woman, who did not have any nearby family – other than her husband. Because of that, he was afraid an extremely small to non-existent crowd would attend her funeral. So, he made an open invitation for everyone to come to his wife’s funeral. The **news report** described how the Church, where the funeral was going to be held, was already overflowing with Flowers sent by people from all over the world. Furthermore, instead of nobody else attending the funeral, there was going to be an overflowing number of attendees. **When the word got out about the husband’s fear of no mourners – that he would be alone, many people in El Paso responded to show him and his deceased wife that they were not alone!**

In a recent South Central Conference Newsletter, our Conference Minister discussed Psalm 23 and shared how he had gone through a very fearful and lonely experience. **Dr. Don** wrote, **“Being a parent is like being a shepherd — flat out scary at times.”** “Some years ago, I remember being with family in Arizona. Son Josh was visiting with us between Christmas and New Year’s. January 1 he began driving to Colorado in his red Dodge pickup. He left at 8 a.m. in the morning and at 10:30 a.m., I turned on the news and there was a flash bulletin.”

Dr. Don continued, “There had been a huge multi-vehicle crash with numerous fatalities near Salt River Canyon on I-17. The helicopter cameraman zoomed in and what did I see but an absolutely crushed red Dodge pickup.” **“There was no answer on his cell phone and by day’s end, he was long overdue for Colorado. It was one of the longest days of my life.”**

Dr. Don explained, “Reflecting back on that day I realize now that loneliness and fear can easily become our uninvited companions on this journey of life. We human beings are social animals and we need one another. But in the hardest of times, we are at times incapable of community.” **“Too often we walk a lonely road alone.”**

Later in the article, Dr. Don wrote, “Our lives are radically different from those of 1st-century shepherds but in important ways, we are the same. We too know loneliness and fear.” “... we have children, spouses, and friends for whom we would risk our lives. We know that lonely and fearful feeling when the phone rings late at night or early in the morning. Who could be calling at this hour? Where are the children? Are they all home?” Dr. Don elaborated, **“For myself, the heart of the shepherd’s psalm is in these words. ‘Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me.’”**

Returning to the story about his son, Dr. Don continued, “Josh called about 9 p.m. that night. Because of the interstate road closure, he had pulled off on a forest road, hiked a little and then laid down for a bit of sleep. He called when he re-entered cell range and heard my frantic messages. Yes, I had been in panic mode and it was only with time and reflection that I was able to remember.” **“We are never alone.”** (“We Are Never Alone” by Rev. Dr. Don Longbottom, Conference Minister posted on the July 25, 2019 South Central Conference Newsletter)

That brings us to the message of today’s Threshold Moment. Have you ever felt utterly alone? Even for just a moment? Imagine the widow who has lost both husband and son. The pain must be almost unbearable and yet, Jesus says “do not weep.” Loneliness happens for many reasons and can create feelings of isolation, even in the midst of a crowd. Jesus knows this pain and raises us up to be comfort for one another. And so, we ask, **“How are we called to rise up and comfort the lonely?”**

Let’s take a few moments to consider how the Gospel Reading answers that question. As Jesus was entering the town, “a funeral procession” for the only son of a widow was exiting for the burial. **In verses 13-15, the Gospel reported, “When the**

Lord saw her, his heart was filled with pity for her, and he said to her, 'Don't cry.' Then he walked over and touched the coffin, and the men carrying it stopped. Jesus said, 'Young man! Get up, I tell you!' The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother."

It is helpful to note the Greek word which was translated as "filled with pity" has as its root the word, "**agape love**". Jesus knew the woman was in a very bad situation – she was alone, at least with reference to having a man to provide for her welfare. She was doomed to become destitute. She also did not have the love and support of either her husband or her only son because they were both dead. She faced a fearsome and pessimistic future alone. Knowing all of that, Jesus decided to take extraordinary action for the grieving mother and widow. He sought to prepare her for the dramatic change, which was about to transform her life and world by saying, "**Don't Cry.**" Although the gospels shared Jesus raised some people from the dead during his Public Ministry, there were a multitude of people, who died and were not raised from the dead by him. Clearly, it was the severe circumstances the grieving widowed mother was enduring, which led Jesus to respond by raising her son. **Jesus, our Christ, calls those, who follow him to actually follow his example of responding with "agape love" to help overcome the loneliness of persons, who are also having to deal with suffering, fear, loneliness, and especially, death.**

Before we go further on the subject of responding to the loneliness of persons, let's take a moment to clarify the type of loneliness we are focusing on. A person can be very lonely while being surrounded by many loved ones and supposed friends. We are not focusing on people needing a significant other in their lives. We are not called to the role of being matchmakers.

Instead, we are called to be the friends and community, which comforts and supports one another and others, when we or they are having to face fears, death, meaninglessness – any experience of loneliness. All of us – everyone will from time to time feel alone, especially when facing fears, difficulties, and alienation. In such times, you and I – this community of believers are called by Jesus and God to reach out with agape love to comfort, encourage, nurture, and support anyone, who faces loneliness, fear, and despair. **Part of our call is to be present with the suffering person in such times and to encourage them to join in the love and fellowship of the Community of the Body of Christ – especially this expression of It.**

Another part of our call to minister to the needs of the lonely is to remind them and assure them our Divine Parent Agape Loves, Forgives, Invites, and Welcomes them into a New Relationship with God and All People – the New Life in Jesus Christ. The "**You'll Never Walk Alone**" music video shared the inspiring and powerful message of God Always Walking with Us! Additionally, there is a powerful poem, which makes the same point. It is titled, "**Footprints in the Sand**". It goes: "One night I dreamed a dream.

As I was walking along the beach with my Lord.
Across the dark sky flashed scenes from my life."

**"For each scene, I noticed two sets of footprints in the sand,
One belonging to me and one to my Lord."**

"After the last scene of my life flashed before me,
I looked back at the footprints in the sand.
I noticed that at many times along the path of my life,
especially at the very lowest and saddest times,
there was only one set of footprints."

"This really troubled me, so I asked the Lord about it.

'Lord, you said once I decided to follow you,
You'd walk with me all the way.

But I noticed that during the saddest and most troublesome times of my life, there was only one set of footprints.
I don't understand why, when I needed You the most, You would leave me."

**"He whispered, 'My precious child, I love you and will never leave you Never, ever, during your trials and testings.
When you saw only one set of footprints,
It was then that I carried you.'"**

Yes, we are called to welcome, love, encourage, and support everyone who is lonely. And, yes, we are called to both proclaim and embody God's Constant Agape Loving Presence for Everyone – even "all the lonely people". Amen.