

A Word to Sheepdogs

FOREWORD

We who live in the age of expressive individualism know that privacy is not all it's cracked up to be. Solitude may be good for the soul, but loneliness is quite another matter. Enforced social distancing has led to big problems recently in societies the world over, but radical isolationism has been a growing problem all over the world for a long time now. Some countries have even created new cabinet positions to foster human contact as a balm for the grievous toll solitude has brought upon their populace. The plain truth is that humans are designed for community, and there's hell to pay when people live in their own little bubble.

As egregious as the loneliness pandemic is for human flourishing in society in general, it's a calamity when it occurs within the church of Jesus. "I have called you my friends," he said (John 15:15). "This is my commandment, that you love one another even as I have loved you." (John 15:12) Yet there are so many things in our divided world that separate Christians one from another. Even within the same congregation there are people at odds with each other. Worse, scores of people come and go every Lord's day, living lonely lives of quiet desperation.

Pastor Fleming opens up our eyes to behold this lesion on the body of Christ even as he extols the gift of Christian friendship and points to effective ways to build a genuine fellowship of love among the lonely hearts and souls under your care. Read, mark, and learn. Then implement for the joy and edifying of Christ's holy people!



Rev. Dr. Harold L. Senkbeil

Loneliness in the Parsonage

Rev. David Fleming

“Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted.” (Ps 25:16 ESV)

Introduction

In our electronically connected age, loneliness is on the rise. Cigna’s 2018 loneliness survey reported that nearly half of Americans report being lonely and feeling left out. One in four rarely or never felt as though there are people who understand them. Only 18% feel that there are people they can talk to. Generation Z (adults age 18-22) is the loneliest generation. Studies during the COVID pandemic have indicated increases in isolation, not only among the elderly as we might expect, but also among those in their late teens through early 20s. Nearly two-thirds (61%) of 18- to 25-year-olds surveyed during fall 2020 said they had been seriously lonely during the prior month.¹

Suicide rates in Japan had been falling, but during 2020 they rose by 3.7% due to the increasing isolation that COVID-19 brought to an already lonely society. In 2021 Japan’s Prime Minister, Yoshihide Suga, appointed a Minister of Loneliness following the lead of the United Kingdom.² In 2018, Prime Minister Theresa May added “Loneliness” to the charge of the under secretary for sport and civil society.³ Loneliness has the same health impact as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Multiple studies show that loneliness is linked to poorer

outcomes from cancer and heart surgery.⁴

Pastors and their wives are not immune from this societal trend. In fact, some report that isolation among pastors and their wives is worse than among others. LifeWay’s 2017 survey of protestant pastors’ spouses revealed that while they largely find ministry has had a positive effect on their families, nonetheless these pastors’ spouses are largely isolated. Two-thirds (69%) report “I have very few people I can confide in about the really important matters in my life.” More than half (56%) agree that “there are too few relationships in my life that make me feel emotionally connected with others.” Additionally, 55% say “There are not enough relationships in our lives where we feel we can be ourselves.”⁵

Interestingly, some pastors are rarely or ever lonely, yet their wives can be quite lonely. Peter Croft says that his personal research indicates that there are high levels of loneliness among pastors, but that pastors’ wives are often the loneliest members of the congregation. “Being a pastor and the wife of a pastor can indeed be a very lonely position. In some circumstances, the culture of the church makes it difficult for them to have meaningful relationships where it is safe to be genuine, transparent, open with their struggles, and honest about church issues.”⁶

¹ Anne Marie Chaker, “Loneliness Hits Young Adults Especially Hard in Pandemic” *Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 24, 2021, A11.

² [greatgameindia.com/japan-minister-loneliness-covid-19/](https://www.greatgameindia.com/japan-minister-loneliness-covid-19/), Feb. 15, 2021.

³ Ceylan Yeginsu, “U.K. Appoints a Minister for Loneliness”, *New York Times*, Jan. 17, 2018.

⁴ Nick Tate, “Loneliness Rivals Obesity, Smoking as Health Risk,” www.webmd.com/balance/news/20180504/loneliness-rivals-obesity-smoking-as-health-risk, May 4, 2018.

⁵ Life Way Pastor-Spouse-Research-Report-Sept-2017.

⁶ Brian and Cara Croft, *The Pastor’s Family: Shep-*

What is Loneliness?

Loneliness is actually quite difficult to define, because it is not directly linked to external causes. People react differently to the same conditions. One can feel alone in a crowd or even in a small family gathering; alternatively, some feel connected even while isolated from others. For example, during the COVID-19 shut-down many have reported that they actually enjoyed being able to work alone. Kevin Vost offers this helpful definition:

Loneliness is a product of our God-given human capacity to think and reflect about things. It is defined as a “perceived social isolation.” Note the importance of the word *perceived*. We feel lonely when we think there is a discrepancy between the social connectedness we would like to have and that which we do have. This is not to say that loneliness is “all in one’s head,” something to be dismissed or ignored, since the lonely person’s perception of a serious lack in social connection may be very accurate indeed.⁷

Loneliness serves the helpful function of getting the lonely soul to seek out community and friendship.

Consequently, loneliness is not a diagnosable mental disorder, but it may lead to or flow from some mental disorders, especially depression. Regardless, loneliness can produce great suffering itself.⁸

herding Your Family through the Challenges of Pastoral Ministry, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013, 41.

⁷ Kevin Vost, *The Catholic Guide to Loneliness: How Science and Faith Can Help Us Understand It, Grow from It, and Conquer It*, Manchester, N.H.: Sophia Institute Press, 2017, 5 (emphasis his).

⁸ Vost, *Loneliness*, 53.

Loneliness serves the helpful function of getting the lonely soul to seek out community and friendship. As Vost observes:

Feelings of loneliness may serve a valuable service if they motivate us to connect or reconnect on the personal, relational, or collective level. Loneliness has been compared to the physical sensation of thirst as well as to pain. Loneliness may well be painful, but how dangerous or at least empty life would be if we did not even care if we have become isolated from others and had no thirst to reconnect.

Additionally, loneliness, “may open us up to a closer relationship with God as we offer up our emotional pain and embrace redemptive suffering through Christ. It may also enhance our awareness and motivate us to strive to help heal the loneliness of our neighbors.”

Isolation and Solitude

There is a valuable distinction between solitude and isolation. Solitude can be a helpful tool and respite. Jesus encouraged and practiced solitude, “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.” (Mark 6:31) Repeatedly Jesus goes off by himself to pray and meditate. (See Luke 5:16, 6:12, 9:18, 28, 11:1; Matt 14:23, 26:36-44; Mark 1:35, 6:46, 14:32-39; John 17) Such time with the Word of God and prayer is a vital part of receptive spirituality.

Solitude can be a helpful tool to prepare us to serve others in love. Down-time to enjoy a hobby, a book, or exercise can be mind clearing. Especially time meditating on our Lord’s Word and crying out in prayer refreshes our souls like a tree planted by streams of water (Ps 1). It renews us in our identity as the baptized children of our Heavenly Father. So, Luther teaches us to mark ourselves with the sign of the cross and our baptismal name with the invocation. In so doing, whether alone or with others, we are put

in our place, a most blessed place, as children of our Father who have been redeemed by Christ Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit. Thus, we're at home with our Lord no matter where we are.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer warns us of the great danger of being without either solitude or community.

Let him who cannot be alone beware of community. He will only do harm to himself and to the community. Alone you stood before God when he called you; alone you had to answer that call; alone you had to struggle and pray; and alone you will die and give an account to God. You cannot escape from yourself; for God has singled you out. If you refuse to be alone you are rejecting Christ's call to you, and you can have no part in the community of those who are called. "The Challenge of death comes to us all, and no one can die for another. Everyone must fight his own battle with death by himself, alone. . . . I will not be with you then, nor you with me" (Luther).

But the reverse is also true: *Let him who is not in community beware of being alone.* Into the community you were called, the call was not meant for you alone; in the community of the called you bear the cross, you struggle, you pray. You are not alone, even in death, and on the Last Day you will be only one member of the great congregation of Jesus Christ. If you scorn the fellowship of the brethren, you reject the call of Jesus Christ, and thus your solitude can only be hurtful to you. "If I die, then I am not alone in death; if I suffer they [the fellowship] suffer with me" (Luther).⁹

⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, New York: HarperCollins, 2009, 77.

Loneliness Factors

Several factors exacerbate loneliness. The first three are particular to our times: frenetic lives, online interactions, and lack of face-to-face conversation.

Our hectic-paced living doesn't allow friendships to be savored and relationships to grow. Friendships take time. It took nearly the entire Lord of the Rings trilogy to depict the richness of friendship, while shallow sexual intimacy can be portrayed in an instant. There was the common myth that we just need quality time with others, quantity isn't so important, but to be able to reach quality time, a generous quantity of interaction is helpful. Will Schwalbe describes well the frenetic living that avoids depth and relationship:

"We overschedule our days and complain constantly about being too busy; we shop endlessly for stuff we don't need and then feel oppressed by the clutter that surrounds us; we rarely sleep well or enough; we compare our bodies to the artificial ones we see in magazines and our lives to the exaggerated ones we see on television; we watch cooking shows and then eat fast food; we worry ourselves sick and join gyms we don't visit; we keep up with hundreds of acquaintances but rarely see our best friends; we bombard ourselves with video clips and emails and instant messages; we even interrupt our interruptions."¹⁰

There is evidence that online interactions are at least aggravating, if not causing, loneliness. We're learning that social media has been designed to get us dependent on "likes" rather than engaged interactions. It breeds and fosters a kind of narcissism that is more interested in how others reward me, than in how I am

¹⁰ Will Schwalbe, *Books for Living*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017, 13.

learning about and serving others. Jenni Russell writes:

The internet is “increasingly where we live our lives, communicate, find jobs, partners, homes, lovers.

We’re hijacked by its dopamine deliveries, at the mercy of its stealthy algorithms. It’s seductive, exciting and convenient.

Its channels are the means by which we both keep in touch and keep others at bay. We often prefer the distance and control it gives us to the messy unpredictable reality of conversations or meetings.

Teenagers don’t phone each other; that’s aggressive. Singles on dating apps say there’s far more texting and “ghosting” than dates.

Parents in parks are engrossed by their phones, not their children.

In a glamorous Parisian restaurant last week, so sought after that France’s richest man was sitting in a corner, I watched as a table of four impossibly beautiful young people conversed over a single course, then took out their mobiles and sat in rapt silence for the rest of it.

A psychotherapist tells me that when he counsels troubled 20-somethings about their agonised relationships they will report “he said” and “I said,” only for him to realise that it’s rare for anything to have been actually spoken with voice and nuance and emotion, let alone face and presence. They are referring to written messages, with their infinite capacity for misinterpretation. His clients, seemingly longing for rewarding contacts with others, are blocking them.

We’re choosing this, but the new world of remote connection and automation is not making us happy. It is breeding loneliness.¹¹

Anthony Esolen, the insightful literature scholar and social critic, observes that our society has become weary of creation, of man, of male and female because we’ve turned from God and don’t interact face to face much anymore. He writes about the painting “An Old Man and His Grandson” by Domenico Ghirlandaio from around 1490. It is a uniquely realistic painting in that it shows the old man with a disfigured, bulbous nose. The nose is likely what one notices first in the work. Then one is drawn to the grandfather’s compassionate eyes looking toward his grandson, who, in turn, tenderly looks to his grandfather. Esolen argues that real face-to-face interaction works like this painting. We’re flawed people, but when we actually talk to one another we get past the surface problems to meaningful relationship.

Eric Jacobsen echoes Esolen’s concern about the lack of real face-to-face connectedness. He argues that the car windshield, television screen, and smartphone are the three pieces of glass that have exacerbated a lack of belonging in our society.¹²

To Esolen, the problem is that because we’ve lost delight in the Creator, we’ve lost delight in the creation, in mankind, in beauty, and in life around us. So many hide in their man-caves staring at a pixelated world alone in the dark.

What is the mark of an exhausted civilization? Hiding, perhaps; even to hide in the glare and noise and joyless commotion of wealth. Pride goeth before a fall, but *acedia* cometh after to

¹¹ Jenni Russell, “Rise of the machines has us tapping into an era of lonely desperation,” *The Australian Times*, November 22, 2019.

¹² Eric O. Jacobsen, *Three Pieces of Glass: Why We Feel Lonely in a World Mediated by Screens*, Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2020, xi.

do its slow erosive and enervating work, if we can call work what is merely busy, like a cancer. Man hides from God and calls it liberty. But having turned his eyes from his Creator, he turns from the creation as well, which he will not acknowledge as a gift. ...The caveman of our day shuts himself indoors, and even his concern for the environment — to such has the world of kingfishers and dragonflies been reduced — has less of love for creation than of irritation at his fellows. They eat too much.¹³

Particularly of import to the *seelsorger* are the spiritual diseases that isolate us. Shame from sins committed against us can drive us to hide and thus keeps us from genuine engagement with our neighbors. Including, of course, the shame of being rejected precisely because of faithfulness to our Lord and his word in this adulterous and sinful generation. One pastor reports that he had never felt lonely until his colleagues turned from him and literally quit being his friends because of his faithful confession. David prays “Because of all my adversaries I have become a reproach, especially to my neighbors, and an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee from me.” (Ps 31:11)

Satan uses our shame to drive us to think that our Lord has abandoned us since He allowed this evil to befall us, or to fill us with anger and then condemnation of those who have sinned against us. So, we are tempted to fall into despair, which will isolate us further or into withholding our love and service from others, which also turns us away from our neighbors. Our Lord Jesus himself was purposefully shamed on the cross with the intention of isolating him from others and cutting him off from his people. Interestingly, Jesus refuses to allow the shame to turn him away from

others, but having confidence in his innocence before the Father, he considers and turns to his neighbors: praying for those who crucify him, comforting the repentant thief, putting Mary and John into each other’s care, praying to the Father a Psalm of lament, and announcing for our benefit the completed saving work.

*What joyful release and
community we enjoy
in our fellowship as
repentant, forgiven sinners!
There is great benefit
to receiving absolution
from one’s own pastor.*

Our own sin and its festering guilt also cut us off from God and from others. Unrepented sin drives a wedge between the sinner and his gracious Lord. It also causes the sinner to hide from others, out of guilt and shame. Bonhoeffer notes that, “Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous is his isolation.”¹⁴ What joyful release and community we enjoy in our fellowship as repentant, forgiven sinners! There is great benefit to receiving absolution from one’s own pastor. Bonhoeffer again, “In confession the break-through to community takes place.”¹⁵ Additionally, there is communal benefit from a joint confession, as in the Lord’s Prayer and the confession that often begins the Divine Service.

No doubt there are many isolating events; for example, death of a loved one, moving to a new community, injury, illness, disappointments, children moving away from home, and the

¹³ Esolen, Anthony. “About Face: On Beauty and the Personal Being of God and Man”. *Touchstone* 33:1, Jan./Feb. 2020, 26-29.

¹⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 112.

¹⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 112.

exhaustion of rearing young children. No wonder there's a longstanding practice of visiting during such times. The "mutual conversation and consolation of brethren" is of particular comfort during such adversity.

Pastors and Their Wives

There are also several isolating challenges that are specific to pastors and their wives. Often pastors and their families serve in a cultural setting that they haven't experienced before. This change in culture is an expected part of overseas missionary deployment, but it can be a surprisingly challenging aspect of serving in one's own country. Deaconess Tiffany Manor previously served church worker families in the New England District as the Director of Worker Support. She visited church workers and their families regularly to assist them in multiple ways. Often pastors and wives who have lived their lives in the midwestern United States come to serve in New England. For some of these midwestern transplants there is culture shock. A mom who is used to walking her children on sidewalks through their Midwest neighborhood is surprised to find that there are no sidewalks in her new community. Often there's a different rhythm to life, different expectations of dress and interaction styles, and for some, a closed-in feeling by the large trees or by high urban density. These social differences are real and they can be trying. One former missionary compared these cultural challenges to the reality television show "The 1900 House." Produced by the BBC, the show follows a modern family who lived for three months in a house built in 1890 retrofitted to be historically accurate for 1900. The family suddenly adapted to life with an outdoor bathroom, with laundry done by heating water on a wood stove, with gas lighting, and no electricity, internet, phones, television, and changes in societal order and habits. It's humorous as a television show, but if this were the way the family was to live for

years on end, one can imagine the physical and emotional fatigue.

For those moving into a new cultural setting it's helpful to find a guide, a person from church or the community — perhaps a neighboring pastor and his wife — to teach the unique characteristics of the new community. Missionaries report that they deeply value experienced missionaries who have found their way through the new culture. Others have developed friendships with those native to the new culture or who have moved there themselves. It is beneficial to view this as an opportunity to learn, to hear the stories and be immersed in the lives of others, and to remain connected to long term friends who are back home.

Deaconess Manor has observed that it is not helpful for pastor's wives to view their vocation as *pastor's wife* rather than *wife*. Women that consider themselves a pastor's wife instead of simply the wife of a man who happens to be a pastor tend to imagine that they cannot be friends with congregants or neighbors or they imagine barriers that need not exist. Wilhelm Loehe began his writing to a young pastor's wife in 1837 with this first point: "Every pastor's wife ought to understand her calling properly. She does not participate in the [pastoral] office with her husband; rather, she participates in the household with her husband, as does every other wife." He summarizes his teaching on this point, "A wife who fulfills her calling is just as honorable as her husband who fulfills his calling."¹⁶

Walter Trobisch, in his helpful narrative book on marriage, *I Married You*, gives insight into the loneliness specifically of pastor's wives when their husbands do not maintain boundaries to protect the family's time together. He describes the chaotic meals at the home of his host pastor, while visiting a congregation

¹⁶ J.K. Wilhelm Loehe, *The Pastor*, ed. Charles Schaum, trans. Wolf Dietrich Knappe and Charles Schaum, Concordia Publishing House, 2015, 143.

in Africa. The pastor is constantly answering the phone, being interrupted at the door, and consequently leaving his wife feeling like she has no voice. Ironically, Trobisch does the same to his beloved Ingrid when she meets up with him several days later. Refreshingly, Trobisch repentantly discloses both what he was trying to do and how Ingrid's perception differed.¹⁷ He then repents and listens in a profound way.

Loneliness in Holy Scripture

Of course, loneliness is nothing new. Throughout Holy Scripture we find loneliness and isolation burdening faithful believers. There are many examples; we'll consider five: Joseph, Elijah, John the Baptist, Paul, and John.

Joseph finds himself alone repeatedly after, as Luther considers it, his father put him in the priestly office. First, proclaiming the divine revelation given him turns his family against him. Then, it leads his brothers to seek to harm him and sell him into slavery. After being sold into slavery he finds himself isolated. But as Gen 39:2, 21, 23 tell us, "The Lord was with Joseph." Here is spiritual comfort for the isolated soul. Luther comments:

But Moses describes the slavery of Joseph and says: "THE LORD WAS WITH JOSEPH." The Lord did it. From his father Jacob he received the Word which he keeps firmly in his heart — the Word by which he was taught to believe, and trust in, the mercy of God. Through this faith he conquered all. Not indeed that his flesh did not feel those horrible assaults of the trials, since the flesh is very soft and is unable to bear trials or to keep from raging against GOD. But the Holy Spirit strengthened him. Therefore Moses says: "THE LORD WAS WITH HIM." For He takes delight

¹⁷ Walter Trobisch, *I Married You*, Quite Waters Publications: Bolivar, MO, 2000, 147.

in associating with such people.¹⁸

When Joseph is falsely accused, condemned, and placed into prison, there is still light and hope: "But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison." (Gen 39:21) Luther comments:

Christ, the Bishop of souls (1 Peter 2:25) who is mindful of hell and death, is the ONLY ONE who sees Joseph, the ONLY ONE who cares about Him. He rejoices that such a beautiful sacrifice is being offered to Him. Therefore when all things seem hopeless, and no help or comfort is left, then the help of the Lord begins. He says: "Behold, I am present, Joseph; let it be enough for you that I am mindful of you." Accordingly, this text — "The Lord was with Joseph" — is full of consolation and joy. For although he is not yet liberated, God is nevertheless already thinking about raising him up from death and hell after his blood has cried long enough to heaven (Gen 4:10) and has brought it about that the Lord became the Bishop of his soul and inclined His mercy to him.¹⁹

When one is lonely, here is comfort: Christ sees, Christ cares, Christ is present as he was with Joseph.

When one is lonely, here is comfort: Christ sees, Christ cares, Christ is present as he was with Joseph. So Luther teaches his readers: "To us it is also said in Baptism, in Absolution, in Communion: 'I am the Lord your God, do not be troubled! I will care for you! Cast your care

¹⁸ LW 7:57.

¹⁹ LW 7:100.

on Me! You have a God who has promised that He will care for you.”²⁰

Elijah suffers terrible isolation. After the sacrifice at Mount Carmel, the slaughter of the false priests, and Jezebel’s edict to have Elijah put to death, Elijah runs and hides. He collapses under a broom tree. Precisely there in his isolation brought about by this intense persecution, the Lord himself (the Angel of the LORD) attends to Elijah, feeding him and then waking Elijah again with this encouragement: “Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you.” (1 Kings 19:7). Through the food and drink provided by the pre-incarnate Christ, Elijah eventually ends up at the cave of Horeb. Again, the Lord visits him this time asking, ‘Elijah, what are you doing here?’ His answer reveals to the Lord and us the painful isolation Elijah suffers. “I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away.” (1 Kings 19:10) The Lord’s answer is full of compassion for his lonely servant. He directs Elijah to appoint workers and his successor with the implied promise that he will be relieved from this great burden. Additionally, the Lord promises that Elijah is not the only one, there are seven thousand others who remain faithful.

John the Baptist, in a seeming parallel with Elijah, also suffers isolation. John is locked up as a prisoner of Herod. He, like Elijah, is nearing the end of his earthly journey. John, like Elijah, pours out to the Lord his deep distress at the seeming failure of his ministry. John does it by sending word to Jesus through his followers. Jesus’ answer is similarly kind and encouraging to John as it was to Elijah. “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the

poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.” (Luke 17:22-23)

But Jesus says more. After John’s disciples had gone, Jesus spoke even more comforting words for those who struggle with isolation and subsequent doubt. He describes John positively. Here is insight into how our Lord looks at his faithful ones under distress. “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who are dressed in splendid clothing and live in luxury are in kings’ courts. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, ‘Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.’ I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” (Luke 17:24-28)

In 2 Timothy, Paul writes candidly about his abandonment. “You are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me, among whom are Phygelus and Hermogenes.” And yet he also rejoices in the help the Lord provided him. “May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains” (2 Tim 1:15–16). At the end of this epistle, he also lists those who have left him and writes “Luke alone is with me.” Even the apostle Paul longed for the companionship of Timothy and other faithful believers.

The apostle John found himself exiled to the Island of Patmos. During his abandonment there the Lord visited him and gave him The Revelation of Jesus Christ to Saint John. The theme that frames the beginning, end, and middle of Revelation is that John, and indeed, the whole Christian church, is never alone.

Revelation 1 begins with Jesus speaking to

²⁰ LW 6:364.

John on Sunday, the “Lord’s day.” John turns to see the Lord who has spoken with a trumpet-like voice. But first he does not see Christ. He sees first the seven golden lampstands — that is, the seven congregations to which John will be instructed to write letters. And then he sees Jesus. Where is the Lord Jesus? He is in the midst of his churches and also with his sequestered apostle John.

Additionally, in the Lord’s right hand are seven stars and our Lord reveals that “the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches”. (Rev 1:20) These “angels” are the messengers to the congregations, that is, the pastors who proclaim Christ Jesus. Our Lord Jesus holds his pastors.

At the end of Revelation, the culmination of all things is the marriage of Christ and his bride, the church, as the new Jerusalem is filled with the presence of the Lamb and all his people. Again, the Lord will be with his people.

In the middle of Revelation, we’re given blessed insight into our Lord’s presence with us, especially in Revelation chapters 7 and 14. Chapter 7 gives us the well known and beautiful image of the church on earth as an army of 144,000 who have been sealed on their foreheads — baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ. Coming out of this army and out of the great tribulation, an unnumbered host of white-robed saints who no longer suffer. Both the church militant and the church triumphant are with the Lamb, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Chapter 14 begins with perhaps the most comforting image of all. Once again, the church on earth is pictured as 144,000. This time they are with the Lamb at Mount Zion. This is not a vision of the saints in heaven as is clear from what follows. John hears the new song of heaven, that is, the song that makes new — the song of the gospel of Jesus Christ. “No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth.” (Rev 14:3)

In other words, Revelation 14 is a picture of what Heb 12:22–24 teaches about the Divine Service:

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (ESV)

When we are with the blood of Jesus at the Divine Service, we are not merely with the worshippers we can see; we are, as the liturgy rightly teaches on the basis of Hebrews 12 and Revelation 14, “...with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven.” We’re with Jesus who is with all the saints in heaven and on earth. We are never alone.

The Body of Christ as Real Community

The three synoptic Gospels record a fascinating interchange between Peter and Jesus. Peter states to Jesus, “See, we have left everything and followed you.” Matthew’s account alone has an additional question — “What then will we have?” — which seems implied in the statement itself. (Matt 19:29; See also Mark 10:28; Luke 18:28) Jesus’ answer is of great comfort and care. Here’s Mark’s account:

Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age

to come eternal life.” (Mark 10:29–30)

In all three Gospels, Jesus begins his response by calling attention to how important and reliable this promise is: “Truly (*amen*), I say to you.” Here are words we can bank on. In all three accounts there is the now/not yet tension of our Lord’s kingdom. As Arthur Just notes, “Here is one of Jesus’ clearest statements of inaugurated eschatology: there are many gifts *now* in this world, and in the coming age is the gift of eternal life.”²¹

While we may know theoretically that our Lord knows what’s going on in our life, it is of particular joy that he knows precisely the cost to those who have left house and family behind as our Lord tells us here.

Jesus’ promise comes after the rich young man leaves. Jesus teaches that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom, and the disciples are in shock — who can be saved? It is impossible for man, but not for our Lord. Kenneth Bailey describes how hard Jesus’ words about leaving family and home were to Middle Eastern hearers:

It is nearly impossible to communicate what all of this means in our Middle Eastern context. The two unassailable loyalties that any Middle Easterner is almost required to consider more important than life itself are *family* and the *village home*. When Jesus puts both of these in *one* list, and then

²¹ Arthur A. Just, Jr., *Luke 9:41-24:53, Concordia Commentary*. (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia, 1987) 701 (emphasis Just).

demands a loyalty that supersedes them both, he is requiring that which is truly impossible to the Middle Easterner, given the pressures of his culture. The ten commandments he can manage, but this is too much. Only with God are such things possible.²²

Following this, Jesus’ avowed promise is of great significance, especially for many pastors, missionaries, and their families. For what have they done, but “left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands” for “my sake and for the gospel?”

Our Lord’s words here teach at least these two things: first, Jesus knows. He knows the challenge of leaving that many have endured for the sake of the gospel. While we may know theoretically that our Lord knows what’s going on in our life, it is of particular joy that he knows precisely the cost to those who have left house and family behind as our Lord tells us here. Second, Jesus promises help *now* and of course eternally as well. Jesus provides for our need of home and family not only eternally, but here and now in the community of Jesus and his body, the church. Arthur Just comments on Luke’s account of this promise:

For a disciple who has ears to hear Jesus’ words, the gift in this present age is the presence of Jesus, whose teaching and miracles signal the inauguration of the new era of salvation during which the Good News is preached to the poor. For the baptized disciples, or catechumens, the gift *now* is the presence of the Word made flesh in the sacrament gifts where they receive a foretaste of eternal life. For the disciple following Jesus and the catechumen in the church, the great gift — both now and not yet — is to be incorporated into a new family, the

²² Kenneth Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980, 169 (emphasis Bailey).

body of Christ, the church where Jesus dwells.²³

This new family is a real family. We're not perfect, except in the eyes of our Lord. Consequently, it's of great benefit that we jointly confess our sin and don't hide under a pretense of always being who we ought to be. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's insightful *Life Together* ponders the value of our repentant community in Christ. "Only that fellowship which faces such disillusionment, with all its unhappy and ugly aspects, begins to be what it should be in God's sight, begins to grasp in faith the promise that is given to it."²⁴ A vital and lively congregation is not necessarily the busiest, but one in which congregants open their hearts and homes to one another, being open and vulnerable to one another.

Consequently, we pray and sing together, because we need each other for encouragement and strengthening. As Bonhoeffer directs:

God has willed that we should seek and find His living Word in the witness of a brother, in the mouth of man. Therefore, the Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's Word to him. He needs him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged, for by himself he cannot help himself without belying the truth. He needs his brother man as a bearer and proclaimer of the divine word of salvation. He needs his brother solely because of Jesus Christ. The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own heart is uncertain, his brother's is sure.

And that also clarifies the goal of all Christian community: they meet one another as bringers of the message of salvation. As such, God permits

them to meet together and gives them community. Their fellowship is founded solely upon Jesus Christ and this "alien righteousness." All we can say, therefore, is: the community of Christians springs solely from the Biblical and Reformation message of the justification of man through grace alone; this alone is the basis of the longing of Christians for one another.²⁵

At the Sunday Divine Service, we intercede for the lonely and isolated and we are gathered into one body through the living Body and Blood of Christ.

The day of the Lord's Supper is an occasion of joy for the Christian community. Reconciled in their hearts with God and the brethren, the congregation receives the gift of the body and blood of Jesus Christ, and, receiving that, it receives forgiveness, new life, and salvation. It is given new fellowship with God and men. The fellowship of the Lord's Supper is the superlative fulfillment of Christian fellowship. As the members of the congregation are united in body and blood at the table of the Lord so will they be together in eternity. Here the community has reached its goal. Here joy in Christ and his community is complete. The life of Christians together under the Word has reached its perfection in the sacrament.²⁶

Sixteen Practical Suggestions

Here are sixteen suggestions to deal with our own loneliness and the loneliness of those committed to our care.

First, if there has been longstanding loneliness, seek consultation with a mental health

²³ Just, *Luke*, 701.

²⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 27.

²⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 23.

²⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 122.

professional, preferably a psychiatrist or a clinical psychologist, to discover what's going on and to establish more helpful patterns.²⁷

Second, if guilt, bitterness or shame are isolating a pastor or his wife from others, visit a pastor for a pastoral consultation with perhaps private confession to forgive guilt, relieve bitterness, and for a blessing, to offer cleansing from the shame of having been sinned against.

Third, recognize there are many levels of interactions with people in daily life. Eric Jacobsen offers that there are four levels of belonging and it is helpful to have a sense of belonging at each of these levels:

- *Intimate belonging* is the kind of belonging we experience with our spouse or maybe a best friend.
- *Personal belonging* is the kind of belonging we experience with our families and close friends.
- *Social belonging* is the kind of belonging we experience with people that we recognize but may not yet know very well. ... In settings for social belonging, we often self-select those with whom we want to experience personal or even intimate belonging.
- *Public belonging* is the kind of belonging we experience with those whom we may not know personally but with whom we are connected through some external commonality.²⁸

Consequently, seek to have friendly interactions even with the checker at the grocery store. These, of course, won't be, at least at the beginning, deep friendships, but a life rich in kind connections at every level increases our own sense of belonging and that of others as well. It may well be that even a friendly casual

encounter might eventually lead to a deeper level of friendship.

Fourth, recognize what a rare and divine gift friendship is. Bonhoeffer notes: "Christian community is like the Christian's sanctification. It is a gift of God which we cannot claim." He suggests that a key to growing in friendship is to rejoice in what the Lord has already given. "The more thankfully we daily receive what is given to us, the more surely and steadily will fellowship increase and grow from day to day as God pleases."²⁹ Vost suggests what benefit friendships can be:

The ability to confide in another; to bare our hearts, express our worries, concerns, and passions; and to seek and to give acknowledgment, support, and advice are among the hallmarks of friendship. Depending on their nature and intensity, friendships can provide remedies, or at least soothing balms, to the loneliness of both emotional and social isolation.³⁰

However, friendships can be undermined from exaggerated demands, as indeed, can marriages. With Bonhoeffer we want to receive friendships as pure gift and give thanks for what the friendship is and not reject it because it is not greater than it is. Bonhoeffer even posits that flaws in our relationship with brothers in Christ are of benefit to us, because these drive us to rely on our Lord's mercy.

Thus the very hour of disillusionment with my brother becomes incomparably salutary, because it so thoroughly teaches me that neither of us can ever live by our own words and deeds, but only by that one Word and Deed which really binds us together — the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. When the morning mists of dreams

²⁷ Vost, *Loneliness*, 54.

²⁸ Jacobsen, *Three Pieces*, 7.

²⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 30.

³⁰ Vost, *Loneliness*, 81.

vanish, then dawns the bright day of Christian fellowship.³¹

Fifth, enter the day's interactions with a realistic attitude. Kevin Vost offers this suggested thought as you head out:

Today I will encounter some lonely person, the bereaved perhaps, the newcomer to this city or to this school or place of work, the person who feels left out even within his own family. This person may ignore me, not look me in the eye, not return my greeting, or treat me with suspicion, but I will remember that such people are my brothers and sisters in Christ and God has called us to be there for one another. Therefore, I will make some effort to connect with this person even in the smallest way to lighten the burden of his loneliness."³²

Sixth, remember everyone wants to be loved and to belong. Greet loved ones with enthusiasm, thankfulness, and attentiveness.

Seventh, foster the practice of hospitality. Consider inviting other pastors and their families or other families to your own home for dinner, lunch, drinks, dessert, or games together. John Kleinig has found that for pastors and their wives, in particular, this is the best way to alleviate loneliness.

Eighth, pastors and wives cannot always see other pastors and their wives face-to-face because of where the Lord has placed them. Be creative in using new media (Zoom, FaceTime, Facebook, etc.) to reach out to each other. It's especially helpful, as Luther often does in his letters of spiritual comfort, to express our own vulnerability in beginning conversation. For example, "I'm having a tough time, how do you feel?" "This text is a challenge for me to figure out how to preach it — how do you handle it?"

Ninth, enjoy the brotherhood in ministry and the sisterhood of pastors' wives. Admittedly, not all pastors are friends, but we are brothers. We are not called to be lone rangers, but to work together as brothers. Pastors' wives, while each unique, have similarities because of their husbands' calling and their participation in the body of Christ. One of the intentionally helpful outcomes of DOXOLOGY's Classic Program, especially the Grand Reunion, is the commonality experienced and fostered by pastors and their wives with their brothers and sisters in Christ.

Tenth, do something together with others. Shared projects and activities are especially helpful in bringing men together. Jesus called His apostles "friends" in the context of bringing them into His vital work. In John 15:14–16 Jesus identifies his apostles as friends "...if you do what I command you." In other words, as they worked with him in the work he chose them for, they are friends — chosen and appointed to bear fruit. We are friends with Jesus and with one another as we work together in the work the Lord sent us to do.

Eleventh, many have found relief from loneliness by taking up a hobby or artistic expression that will benefit friends, family, or other people. Those who work alone in making artwork, woodworking, or writing poetry, for example, mitigate their loneliness, because they are making something with an audience in mind.

Twelfth, social media can be used in a way that reduces isolation. If social media is used in a passive way, simply observing the photos and stories of others with merely clicking some "like" or other reaction, such social media use increases isolation. But, if one uses social media as a tool to encourage, support, and help others — specifically by writing comments — loneliness is decreased. Kevin Vost suggests using a timer to set a boundary for social media

³¹ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 28-29.

³² Vost, *Loneliness*, 132-133.

use, so that it does not become a problem itself.³³

Thirteenth, a daily, meaningful conversation with another adult can be of great benefit in relieving loneliness. Consider reaching out to family members, neighbors, friends, and classmates. Taking a walk in a neighborhood gives an opportunity to meet others and engage in face-to-face conversation.

Fourteenth, getting together with other people in a shared interest, for example, Bible classes, choirs, quilters, or men's and women's groups can be very helpful. Volunteering in a community, at a library, community center, hospital, or school can provide helpful interactions and perhaps form friendships. Friendships can be formed at hobby groups, classes at the Y, or ongoing adult education classes.

Fifteenth, visiting those who are lonely, helps relieve loneliness. Of course, this has been one of the most heartbreaking and frustrating aspects of COVID lockdowns; the most isolated are further isolated. There are many senior citizens, homebound people, and those in hospice or

Taking time to intentionally listen, learn their stories, encourage, rejoice, or lament with them allows us face-to-face interactions that benefit those who are visited and those who visit.

care facilities who are deeply lonely. Taking time to intentionally listen, learn their stories, encourage, rejoice, or lament with them allows us face-to-face interactions that benefit those who are visited and those who visit.

Sixteenth, letters, notes, cards, and phone calls benefit the receiver and the giver and offer

an opportunity to fill the time with genuine communication.

I Am with You

Matthew's account of the gospel begins with the promise of Immanuel "God with us" and ends with Jesus' promise, "I am with you always until the end of the age." Our Lord's living connection with us by his name marked on us in Holy Baptism, spoken into our ears and souls by his word of promise, and placed in us in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar sustain us in the life of the Triune God and his holy people. Our Lord hears the cries of isolated lepers, a ritually unclean woman, a demon-possessed man cut off from all, and a doomed thief who happily meets his Savior on the cross next door. So he hears the cries of all his lonely people and keeps His promise to be with them.

Our Lord offers us, in contrast to the individualistic look at life so prevalent in our age, an eternal family: a brotherhood and sisterhood by our connection with our living Lord Jesus, which is the Divine realistic antidote to loneliness. Surprisingly, Chris Arnade, (who is not yet a Christian), in carefully studying what he calls "back row America" — the urban and rural parts of our country where reside those deemed "unimportant" by the elite — the church is the singular institution that treats everyone with dignity and offers community to all. Sure, the church has a pointed message of law and gospel, but here our Lord has called his people to treat everyone with dignity, and Arnade found this universally true.³⁴

After all, baptized believers in Christ are the children of God, have been bathed together into one community, one family, one Lord Jesus Christ. What a gift to one another. We've been made a community, a family that will never fail, united in our dear brother Jesus Christ. He has adopted us into the family of our Father through

³³ Vost, *Loneliness*, 146.

³⁴ Chris Arnade, *Dignity: Seeking Respect in Back Row America*, New York: Sentinel, 2019, 112-113.

the new birth of water and of the Spirit into his full, saving work. We all need this community in these grey and latter days.



Bibliography

- Arnade, Chris. 2019. *Dignity*. New York: Sentinel.
- Bailey, Kenneth E. 1980. *Through Peasant Eyes*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. 2009. *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian in Community*. New York: HarperOne.
- Chaker, Anna Marie. 2021. "Loneliness Hits Young Adults Especially Hard in Pandemic." *Wall Street Journal*, February 24, 2021.
- Croft, Brian, and Cara Croft. 2013. *The Pastor's Family*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Esolen, Anthony. 2020. "About Face: On Beauty and the Personal Being of God and Man." *Touchstone*, January.
- Jacobsen, Eric O. 2020. *Three Pieces of Glass*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press.
- "Japan Appoints Minister Of Loneliness To Combat COVID-19 Related Suicides | GreatGameIndia." 2021. GreatGameIndia. February 15, 2021. <http://greatgameindia.com/japan-minister-loneliness-covid-19/>.
- Just, Arthur A. 1996. *Luke: 9:51-24:53*. Concordia Commentary. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House.
- Loeche, Wilhelm. 2015. *The Pastor*. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House.
- "Pastor-Spouse-Research-Report-Sept-2017.Pdf." 2017. LifewayResearch.Com. Lifeway Research. September 2017. <http://lifewayresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Pastor-Spouse-Research-Report-Sept-2017.pdf>.
- Russell, Jenni. 2018. "Rise of the Machines Has Us Tapping into an Era of Lonely Desperation." *The Australian Times*, November 22, 2018.
- Schwalbe, Will. 2017. *Books for Living*. New York: Knopf.
- Tate, Nick. 2018. "Loneliness Rivals Obesity, Smoking as Health Risk." WebMD. May 4, 2018. <http://www.webmd.com/balance/news/20180504/loneliness-rivals-obesity-smoking-as-health-risk>.
- Trobisch, Walter. 2000. *I Married You*. Bolivar, MO: Quiet Waters Publications.
- Vost, Kevin. 2017. *Catholic Guide to Loneliness*. Manchester, N.H.: Sophia Institute Press.
- Yeginsu, Ceylan. 2018. "U.K. Appoints a Minister for Loneliness." *New York Times*, January 17, 2018.

Reflection

AFTERWORD & PRAYER

Dare we admit our loneliness? Dare we acknowledge our feelings of isolation? Dare we confess that godly solitude is too often neglected?

Pastor Fleming identifies and diagnoses one of the burdens of a pastor, of his wife, and of his family. We are not exempt from the challenges and temptations of our “wired” but disconnected culture. Isolation is chronic. Loneliness is wearying. Solitude is elusive.

We have much in common with our biblical brothers! Joseph, the sold-into-slavery dreamer, Elijah under the broom tree and in the cave, John the Baptizer in prison and doubting, Paul, abandoned, shipwrecked, and beaten, John the Apostle in exile. All were alone with their burdens, but they were not left alone.

So Pastor Fleming offers encouragement and hope. We are not alone. You are not alone. I am not alone. The crowd of witnesses surrounds us. The Spirit prays for and with us. The presence of Christ sustains us. The visible Body of Christ encourages us. For we are the household, the baptized family of God. And the Father is near to all who cry out in faith and longing: “Abba!”

ƒ *Gracious God, for you alone my soul waits in silence; from you comes my salvation. When I am lonely, remind me of your promise never to forsake me. When I am isolated, remind me by your baptismal calling that I am not alone. When I am in solitude, teach me from your word that I am loved and treasured and forgiven; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen*

Rev. Mark Barz

