

**Unafraid: 3. Lonely and unloved**  
**Genesis 2:18; Psalm 139:7-10; John 13:34**  
**April 22, 2018**  
**Pastor Steve Richards**

Last weekend while many of you were digging out from the record-breaking April snowstorm, I was experiencing this [photo] It's the 405. If you've not been to Los Angeles, that's Interstate 405 that runs north/south through Los Angeles. At points there are six lanes of traffic in each direction and at all hours of the day and night, it can look more like a parking lot than a freeway. Most of the cars have only one person because if you have two or more persons you can use the seventh lane which is the HOV lane that tends to move marginally faster than the other six. One evening, as we were stuck in traffic, I looked around and began to wonder where all of these cars were going and where had they come from. And was there anyone waiting for them to arrive? Every one of them must have a story, but who could listen? We weren't moving anywhere. We could see each other. Surrounded by people – thousands of us. And yet all alone. In words made famous by the Beatles: *All the lonely people; Where do they all come from? All the lonely people; Where do they all belong?*

Late Monday night, we returned home, and once we had claimed our suitcase, we took the light rail from the airport terminal to the ramp where we had left our car. I was standing between Amanda and a woman seated a few rows back. The woman on the train made a comment about Amanda's purple hair and a conversation ensued between two strangers – at first about hair, but then the woman began talking about a recent trip to Albuquerque and her family and health needs. We were only together for a few minutes, but I think there are people all around us who are waiting for someone to listen to their story, longing to connect with someone. It often happens – and not because I'm wearing a nametag that says "Pastor" and Amanda is wearing a tag that says "therapist." Just two regular people willing to listen – to allow a connection to happen – to bring a big, fearful world a step closer to community.

This morning, in this series about fear, we turn to the fear of being alone and unloved. We all know what it is like to feel alone. Enter a room filled with people and what's the first thing we do? We look for someone we know and if we don't know anyone and no one reaches out to us, it's an awkward feeling – a feeling of being alone – even though we are surrounded by people. Loneliness is a feeling of isolation: nobody notices, nobody really notices me or cares about me. Loneliness is the lack of real companions with whom to share your life. The actress, Anne Hathaway, says: *Loneliness is my least favorite thing about life. The thing that I'm most worried about is just being alone without anybody to care for or someone who will care for me.* Mother Teresa said: *The most terrible poverty is loneliness and the feeling of being unloved.* It was a feeling she struggled with her for much of her life. Loneliness seems so counter-intuitive when we are surrounded by people all the time. We live around people, work around people, attend sporting events, wait in lines, sit in traffic because there are so many people. We can have hundreds of Facebook friends. The truth is you can have a lot of friends and be lonely. You can have no friends and not be lonely.

Most of us live in homes that were designed to promote privacy, not connection. Some of you may remember a time when homes were constructed with front porches so when people took evening walks or afternoon drives, they would run into neighbors sitting on the porch. One thing would lead to another and before long you were invited onto the porch for something cool to drink and conversation. Welcome to the 21<sup>st</sup> century! Who has time for a walk through the neighborhood? What we want is a retreat from the intensity of our lives. We come home, put the garage door down and escape inside to the television or computer and if it's outside, it's not to

the front porch but the back deck. We don't want to see more people. We want to get away from them! The last thing we want at the end of the day is one more conversation. Our goal is to avoid people, but it comes with a cost. The Gallup organization says, "Americans are the loneliest people in the world." One survey indicates that 90% of the male population in American lack a true friend.

We need companionship. From the beginning of time, we were created to be relational. In the Genesis story of creation, God creates the world and everything in it and at the end of each day God looks at what God has created and says, "It is very good." But in the second chapter of Genesis, for the first time, God says something is not good. God looks at the man, the human that God has created and says, **"It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."** And when the man falls asleep, God removes one of his ribs and forms a new and improved version of the man. Human 2.0! This part of the story is not about marriage but our need for companionship. I sat down to write this message at our kitchen table and where did our dog want to be? He had the whole house, but he wanted to be right at my feet. It's not just our pets. We were created to do life together. The first nine months of life are spent inside another human and somewhere between 23 and 27 weeks, we hear our mother's heartbeat for the first time. We hear her breathing and the sound of her voice. No wonder when we are first born, we cry in the middle of the night – not just because we are hungry for food but to be held. And at the end of life, that's also what we crave. Last Monday, Amanda and I visited her aunt who is at the end of life, having suffered from dementia for years and experienced a couple of strokes, unable to speak, not even sure she knew who we were but when Amanda took her hand and stroked her face, I could see it in her eyes – as if an answer to prayer.

There will be times of loneliness when we feel hurt or betrayed, unloved, and all alone. But sometimes the sense of loneliness lasts so long and is so deep that we are convinced we will never be loved, no one wants to be around me. Maybe it was something in our childhood – neglected, rejected, abandoned – and we've carried that with us the rest of our lives. And so we withdraw, because that way you won't be able to reject me. As I mentioned two weeks ago, fear can cause us to react with fight, flight or freeze. So we remove ourselves from opportunities to connect with others and create this shell around us so we can't be hurt, when what we desperately need is companionship. We just don't know how to let someone in.

Some of you have entered retirement having determined you could retire once your finances were in order, but what you didn't realize was when you exited the workplace you also walked away from the people with whom you spent 40-50 hours a week. The greatest indicator of happiness in retirement is not how much you have in your 401k but how many meaningful relationships you have. We need companions.

Last week, I listened to Danielle Strickland. She is an author and speaker from Toronto who has also devoted her life to putting an end to human trafficking. In her talk, she described a recent flight where she found her seat on the plane. Like many of us, she took out headphones and a book, hoping that she would have a couple hours of solitude. Then a young man in what looked to her to be a thousand dollar suit took the seat next to her. As the plane pulled away from the gate, he asked "What do you do?" And not wanting a conversation, she decided to respond with words that usually stop the conversation. She said, "I travel around the world telling people about Jesus?" Undeterred he replied, "Does that make you an evangelist?" "You could say that." "That's interesting because on my last flight I was sitting next to an evangelist." Putting down her book, she said, "And how long have you been running from God?" And he said, "I don't really know about God." So, for the rest of the flight she listened to his story, the crisis he was in – lost his job after putting his company at risk, lost his relationship, feeling alone and unloved.

His whole life was falling down around him. And she told him about God's presence and love and how he has already been forgiven. That's why Jesus died on the cross. And if he could accept God's forgiveness, he could find a way to forgive himself. When the flight ended and they were standing at the baggage carousel, he said, "You saved my life." And she replied that it is really God who does that. But he said, "Really, you saved my life. You see I had a plan to end my life tonight, but you have shown me there is hope – there is another way."

In the gospel of Mark, we find a story where four people came alongside a person in need and brought that person to Jesus to be healed. Mark tells us the man is paralyzed but we are not told whether it is physical or emotional or spiritual paralysis. All we know is that he needs others alongside him. So these four people – friends maybe or strangers, we are not told. All we know is that they came alongside and put him on a stretcher. They become his stretcher-bearers. They carry him to the house, but when they arrive they can't get close to Jesus. But they are determined. They will not be deterred. They climb the stairs to the roof, and once on the flat roof, they dig through it and when the hole in the roof is large enough, they lower their friend to the feet of Jesus. And Jesus looks up at those four stretcher-bearers, recognizing their love for the man now face-to-face with Jesus. He sees their compassion and their faith in what Jesus could do, and Jesus heals the man. It's by the faith of four friends that the paralytic is able to walk again. **He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this."**

The answer to the loneliness that we experience is having stretcher-bearers, companions who will come alongside us. And that's why the church exists? The church is a community of people who are trying to love each other. Jesus said: **A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.** The church that I experienced as a child was a place where I knew I was accepted and loved. Even when life was not going well for me, when I felt rejected everywhere else, I would come to church, knowing I would be accepted and loved. It is possible to feel that here when we gather for worship, but you can attend worship for years and have no meaningful relationships. That's why our faith groups are so important. That's where we do life together. That's where we find stretcher-bearers. There have been times when I was called to the hospital and when I arrived, that person's faith group was already there. We have more than 250 adults who gather together in Bible study, covenant groups, UMW circles, men on 1<sup>st</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup>, faith groups, even an online group that meets weekly. There is no one here who doesn't need what one of these small groups could offer.

I'm also aware that when you show up here on Sundays, there are people here who wonder if anyone cares, if anyone here will reach out to them. No one here knows everyone. Our staff try, but even our staff do not know everyone by name. Haven't you sat down next to someone, maybe you even held their hand at the end of the service but you don't know them. What would it take to greet the people around you – or to offer a time when you could share each other's story. I'd like everyone who walks out of here to know they are loved and valued, but I need your help with this.

There's another answer to our loneliness and that is God. God created us to be in relationship with God. The writer of Psalm 139 begins: **You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar... Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?** We are never really alone. God is saying: I made you; I know you. There is not a moment when I am not with you. I am with you even when you try to push me away. I know every thought. I know the worst thing you have ever done and still I love you. We all need that kind of companion. Our task is to accept that love, to honor and encourage that relationship – to wake up every morning and say, "Thank you, God,

for this new day. Thank you that you are with me. Thank you for loving me. I want to walk with you today." Loneliness is something we all face. There are answers to the loneliness: We need companionship, and God is as near as the air you breathe.

### **Grow, Pray, Study for Week of April 22, 2018**

**Weekly Prayer:** God of grace, you made us with the capacity to love and to be loved. You call us son, daughter and friend. You love us with a love unlike any we have ever known – love that is completely unconditional. May we always love you in return. Give us hearts ready to experience the full measure of your love so that we will be your presence of love to those around us each day. Amen.

### **Monday, April 23**

#### **Scripture: Matthew 14:23; Mark 1:35; John 6:15**

When he sent them away, he went up onto a mountain by himself to pray. Evening came and he was alone.

Early in the morning, well before sunrise, Jesus rose and went to a deserted place where he could be alone in prayer.

Jesus understood that they were about to come and force him to be their king, so he took refuge again, alone on a mountain.

**Observation:** Jesus loved people, yet he regularly sought solitude as a way to refocus and cultivate his walk with God. For some of us, a fear of being alone can grow so strong that we nearly panic if we find ourselves alone. We may almost fixatedly seek to be with others, perhaps even in settings or situations that do not match our stated values. It's a useful spiritual practice to learn to value solitude, intentional or unintentional, and grow stronger through it.

**Application:** The gospel passages often associated prayer with Jesus' times of solitude. He also prayed when around people, but we see that he often found solitude conducive to prayer. In what ways do you find prayer different when you are alone than when you are with others? What strengths can you see in each kind of prayer setting?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, help me not to avoid times of solitude, or to waste them in wishing I were not alone. Teach me how to use those moments, whether minutes or days, into times to draw closer to you. Amen.

### **Tuesday, April 24**

#### **Scripture: Exodus 18:14-18**

When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, "What's this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, while all the people are standing around you from morning until evening?" Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God. When a conflict arises between them, they come to me and I judge between the two of them. I also teach them God's regulations and instructions." Moses' father-in-law said to him, "What you are doing isn't good. You will end up totally wearing yourself out, both you and these people who are with you. The work is too difficult for you. You can't do it alone.

**Observation:** Moses had the task of leading a throng of ex-slaves safely through the Sinai desert. They hadn't learned to work out even minor conflicts. Their slave masters had run everything. Few of them had developed even basic leadership skills, or had reason to give leadership any thought. Moses found himself trying in person to iron out every little problem the people had. But his father-in-law wisely told him, "What you are doing isn't good...you can't do it alone."

**Application:** Sometimes, we carry an emotional burden about challenges in our workplace, family or church, even though there is nothing specific we could do to fix the situation. Or we may be able to affect one part of the problem, but we convince ourselves that we alone must figure out the full solution. Have you ever tried to carry "the weight of the world" on your shoulders alone? How can you recognize people God may have sent to lighten your load?

**Prayer:** God, I can't do your job. Deliver me from the temptation to try to be what you, and only you, can be—the ruler of the universe. Remind me not to try to "do it all alone." Amen.

### **Wednesday, April 25**

#### **Scripture: Genesis 2:18; Ecclesiastes 4:7-12; John 14:18-19**

Then the LORD God said, "It's not good that the human is alone. I will make him a helper that is perfect for him."

Next, I saw under the sun something else that was pointless: There are people who are utterly alone, with no companions, not even a child or a sibling. Yet they work hard without end, never satisfied with their wealth. So for whom am I working so hard and depriving myself of enjoyment? This too is pointless and a terrible obsession. Two are better than one because they have a good return for their hard work. If either should fall, one can pick up the other. But how miserable are those who fall and don't have a companion to help them up! Also, if two lie down together, they can stay warm. But how can anyone stay warm alone? Also, one can be overpowered, but two together can put up resistance. A three-ply cord doesn't easily snap.

"I won't leave you as orphans. I will come to you. Soon the world will no longer see me, but you will see me. Because I live, you will live too.

**Observation:** News reports, and mission partners in various parts of Africa, have showed us the plight of more than 100 million orphans and vulnerable children due to the AIDS epidemic. Genesis 2 stated a human truth: it isn't good for us to be all alone. And Jesus, in a land where poor health and Roman violence left many children orphaned, used that image to promise his followers that, whatever befell their human connections, he would never leave them as orphans. Through the Holy Spirit, he would always be with them.

**Application:** In John 14, Jesus gave his followers a glimpse into the mysteries of God. He preceded the verses we read today by promising to send a "paraclete" (a Greek word meaning companion, helper, advocate and comforter, and referred to the Holy Spirit). Then he said, "I will come to you"—in other words, the Spirit's presence was his presence. When have you sensed Jesus' comfort, protection or uplift without a visible presence giving it to you?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, thank you for keeping your promise not to leave me as an orphan. Teach me how to claim you as my Companion and Comforter, even when my circumstances seem the hardest. Amen.

## Thursday, April 26

### **Scripture: James 1:26-27**

If those who claim devotion to God don't control what they say, they mislead themselves. Their devotion is worthless. True devotion, the kind that is pure and faultless before God the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their difficulties and to keep the world from contaminating us.

**Observation:** True devotion to God, James said, doesn't show itself in grand words, whether they are lofty or angry. Our devotion shows most truly as we actively care for and help those who have to face the world alone. That can be as simple as extending friendship and human warmth to those whose circumstances leave them alone, or as demanding as becoming foster or adoptive parents.

**Application:** In the Roman empire, ordinary Christians suffered from social and legal persecution. But life in those conditions was even harder for orphans and widows, who had no family and no legal standing at all to protect them. Which, James asked, would help them more—a biting, angry tirade against the tyrants, or a tangible act of love and assistance? How can we apply the principle behind his words to situations we face today?

**Prayer:** Lord God, I'm devoted to you—after all, I read the GPS. Give me the insight and the courage to find tangible ways to live out that devotion, serving you by serving others who are alone and hurting. Amen.

## Friday, April 27

### **Scripture: Psalm 139:1-12**

LORD, you have examined me. You know me. You know when I sit down and when I stand up. Even from far away, you comprehend my plans. You study my traveling and resting. You are thoroughly familiar with all my ways. There isn't a word on my tongue, LORD, that you don't already know completely. You surround me—front and back. You put your hand on me. That kind of knowledge is too much for me; it's so high above me that I can't fathom it. Where could I go to get away from your spirit? Where could I go to escape your presence? If I went up to heaven, you would be there. If I went down to the grave, you would be there too! If I could fly on the wings of dawn, stopping to rest only on the far side of the ocean—even there your hand would guide me; even there your strong hand would hold me tight! If I said, "The darkness will definitely hide me; the light will become night around me," even then the darkness isn't too dark for you! Nighttime would shine bright as day, because darkness is the same as light to you!

**Observation:** Have you ever had moments when you feared God had given up on you? Or maybe had a time when you tried to run away from God? The psalmist said that, no matter where we go, God goes there with us. But this sweeping poem didn't merely assert God's presence—it also told believers that God's presence is a good thing, because God will always guide, strengthen and support us.

**Application:** Suppose all of the promises in this psalm were shaped into a commercial for God. Would you believe them? Would you want to have a God who watched over you so faithfully and patiently? Which parts of your life, of yourself, do you keep the most hidden? God knows all about them—and looks on you with compassion and love anyway. Talk trustingly to God about those hidden things today—and listen inwardly for God's response.

**Prayer:** Dear Jesus, at my worst, I feel like hiding from you. At my best, I want you to stay with me all the time—and that’s exactly what you’ve promised to do. Amen.

**Saturday, April 28**

**Scripture: Psalm 27:7-10; Psalm 68:3-6; John 16:32**

LORD, listen to my voice when I cry out—have mercy on me and answer me! Come, my heart says, seek God’s face. LORD, I do seek your face! Please don’t hide it from me! Don’t push your servant aside angrily— you have been my help! God who saves me, don’t neglect me! Don’t leave me all alone! Even if my father and mother left me all alone, the LORD would take me in.

But let the righteous be glad and celebrate before God. Let them rejoice with gladness! Sing to God! Sing praises to his name! Exalt the one who rides the clouds! The LORD is his name. Celebrate before him! Father of orphans and defender of widows is God in his holy habitation. God settles the lonely in their homes; he sets prisoners free with happiness, but the rebellious dwell in a parched land.

Look! A time is coming—and is here!—when each of you will be scattered to your own homes and you will leave me alone. I’m not really alone, for the Father is with me.

**Observation:** Every time we baptize a child, the parents and the congregation are committing themselves to modeling God’s love and goodness for the child. Sadly, in this broken world, in Bible times and still today, human parents, friends and spouses sometimes fall short of living out God’s design. But Scripture said that, even if our human relationships let us down, we do need to fear being alone and friendless. We can always depend, if we will, on God’s loving presence with us.

**Application:** Part of our faith heritage, starting with Methodism’s founder John Wesley, is a profound sense of calling and mission. We believe God calls us to be God’s voice, hands and feet, in a hurting world. God’s work, the psalms said, is to provide a family for orphans, a sustaining relationship for widows, and companionship for all who might be lonely. How can you join in God’s work (and, in the process, build better relationships for yourself)? Do you know anyone who you could uplift by extending God’s love and care?

**Prayer:** O God, the psalmist said you are “Father of orphans and defender of widows.” Thank you for always being with me. Give me eyes to see others who are hurting, and use me to bless them with your love and caring. Amen.