

Called to Community Ephesians 4:1-16

It's been decades since Three Dog Night told us "One is the Loneliest Number." It's been a couple of decades since sociologist Robert Putnam published *Bowling Alone*, about the disruption of community groups. Yet still today, a study commissioned by health insurer Cigna determined one of the biggest challenges facing people of all ages is loneliness. More than half of survey respondents — 54 percent — said they always or sometimes feel that no one knows them well. Fifty-six percent reported they sometimes or always felt like the people around them "are not necessarily with them." And 2 in 5 felt like "they lack companionship," that their "relationships aren't meaningful" and that they "are isolated from others."

Loneliness, or social isolation, has a huge impact. It raises the risk of premature death by up to 50%, ranking near smoking and alcohol use. It increases risks of dementia and mobility loss. It happens sometimes to older people as children grow up and move away, spouses die, and health issues make it more difficult to engage in social activities. Yet it also happens to younger people, who despite high numbers of friends on Facebook or followers on Twitter or Instagram have fewer friends in "real life."

Some of that social isolation happens because we divide ourselves in so many ways. All sorts of demographic information is sliced and diced by big data to show why small specific groups of people behave in different ways. Politics continues to get more and more polarized, with few seemingly willing to work across the aisle to even attempt to draw in independent voters. Name calling, or worse, continues to force people into a bunker mentality.

At its root, though, loneliness and isolation is a result of sin. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve lived in perfect community and harmony with each other and with God. It was only once the serpent made Eve question God's commands and eat the forbidden fruit that they were ashamed to be in the presence of God, and they were exiled into a lonely world.

Loneliness, isolation, separation was a problem for the Ephesians, as well. They were from all walks of life. They were separated from each other because of their different cultures. Many of them were Gentiles, non-

Jewish Christians who were often still treated as strangers by the Jewish Christians who were still trying to figure out how being a Christian was different than being a Jew. They were separated from each other because of their personality conflicts. They were separated from each other because of their sin.

Earlier in this letter, Paul reminded the Ephesians that Jesus had broken down the walls that separated them from each other, and from God. Now, Paul calls the Ephesians into community. Or more precisely, he reminds them God has called them together into a community. Paul uses the metaphor of a body to remind the church how they are to work together. Although he doesn't expand it here as much as he does when he uses the same metaphor with the Corinthians, we get the same result. Different parts of the body have different functions and capabilities, and they all have to work together in order for the body to function well.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing about creating a Christian community of seminarians in Nazi Germany, wrote "Christian community is not an ideal we have to realize, but rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate. The more clearly we learn to recognize that the ground and strength and promise of all our community is in Jesus Christ alone, the more calmly we will learn to think about our community and pray and hope for it." In other words, we are not a community because we wanted to become one. We are a community because God called us together.

While the church can be a solution to the problem of loneliness, it isn't always seen that way. Recent years have seen an incredible downturn in church attendance. Pew Research recently released a study on why people aren't attending church as often anymore. And about 3 in 10 said they didn't believe. But more people say it's because they find another outlet for their faith (37 percent) or dislike certain things about services (37 percent): They haven't found a place of worship that they like, they don't like the sermons at their place of worship or they don't feel welcome.

Of those believers who rarely or never attend services, 6 in 10 identify as Christian, and 44 percent say they pray every day. But as much as they say they've found another outlet for their faith, their actions don't seem to

reflect that. They're not as active in community groups or social causes as those who are active church attenders. They're not as generous with their charitable giving. They still struggle with loneliness.

Faith may be an individual event, but it's not something that we can do on our own. It takes apostles, those who are sent out into the world. It takes prophets to speak the word of God, even when it makes us uncomfortable. It takes evangelists who share the good news to those who haven't heard it before, or at least haven't taken it to heart before. It takes pastors and teachers to continue to teach you how to strengthen your faith. Throughout your entire life of faith, from when you first hear the story of Jesus until you cross the finish line of life, you need others in your life to build up your faith.

All of those different people, all of the different gifts listed there, aren't just called by God to use their gifts to make you a better person. The gifts are not just for self-help or individual improvement. The gifts are given to build up the body of Christ. The gifts are given to build up the community of believers. The gifts are given to build up the church.

We see that in the other lessons for today. Jesus tells his hearers that he is the Bread of Life. Just as God had provided bread in the wilderness for the Israelites on the Exodus, so God was providing what His people needed through Jesus. He gave them all the same food to bring them together.

Pastor Greg Finke sees that, as well. He discovered an equation used to facilitate community. Unhurried time + proximity + activity (food) = conversation. It's not a complicated idea, but it can definitely be hard to find unhurried time. But finding unhurried time, with others, gathered around a common table creates opportunities for conversation and the beginning and strengthening of community.

God continues to do that through the gifts we receive here. God's Word read and proclaimed. Sins confessed and forgiven. The body and blood of Jesus given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. All given by God to strengthen our faith and our bonds with God and each other. Given to help us bear with one another in love, and make us eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, to remain in the one body and one Spirit, with one Lord, one faith, one baptism,

one God and Father of all. With those gifts, God make us grow together.

Sin conspires to keep us separate, keep us lonely, and keep us isolated. But Jesus defeated sin, and his work brings us together. The Holy Spirit works to gather us together, bring us into community, and make us into the body of Christ in the world. We've been called into a community. What a wonderful place to be.

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