

# JOY FLOURISHES IN COMMUNITY

Acts 2:1-21

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Earlier this year I started noticing one topic frequently in the news. I began paying attention, and collecting stories and facts.

First: from January, news that the United Kingdom has appointed an official “Minister of Loneliness” to tackle what Prime Minister Theresa May calls “a sad reality of modern life” for many U.K. citizens. A commission on loneliness was instituted by a former member of parliament, who had begun to hear reports with statistics like these: - more than 9 million people in the U.K. “always or often feel lonely” and “around 200,000 older people have not had a conversation with a friend or relative in more than a month.”

From April, from a column in the New York Times, a few more statistics, this time from the United States: “In the 1980’s, 20% of Americans said they were often lonely. Now it’s 40%. Suicide rates are now at a 30-year high. Depression rates have increased tenfold since 1960, which is not only a result of greater reporting.”

Former Surgeon General Vivek Murthy summarized his experience as a doctor in an article in the Harvard Business Review: “During my years caring for patients, the most common pathology I saw was not heart disease or diabetes; it was loneliness.” Patients came to see Dr. Murthy partly because they were lonely, and partly because their loneliness was making them sick. In his estimation, loneliness is as bad for one’s health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

And I'll wrap this up, before I sink you all to a state of complete misery, with only one more example, but it is equally concerning. I read this report at the beginning of May. The insurance company Signa conducted a survey of 20,000 adults and concluded that most adults consider themselves lonely, with loneliness increasing in the younger generation.

Members of Generation Z, born between the mid-1990s and the early 2000s, scored highest on the loneliness scale. The problem is truly intergenerational.

Some researchers believe that more screen time and social media use may be causing a rise in depression and suicide among American adolescents. But it's not that simple or direct. If people are using screen time and social media to connect with others, it can be helpful. But just scrolling overall, watching what other people are doing, is detrimental. The more face to face social interactions we have, at every age, lessen the feelings of isolation, which makes perfect sense.

These stories captured my attention because they feel authentic to me. Loneliness is a real fact of life. People talk to me about it often. It's not something we like to admit, even to ourselves, but most of us know what loneliness feels like. This spring, one of the most social people I know said to me that he struggles with loneliness. Our busy lives don't make it easy for us to cultivate deep friendships.

In the early years of the internet, a woman came into my office one day. She was struggling with a decision and wanted to talk it out with me. She said to me, "Well, this friend says I should do this, and that friend says I should do something else." As I

listened, I realized that she was seeking advice for a significant life decision from people in a chat room online, people she had never met in person. These online acquaintances were the “friends” upon whom she was relying.

In The Book of Joy, Archbishop Tutu and the Dalai Lama tell us that there is an antidote to loneliness. Here’s how the Dalai Lama puts it. “How do we create more friends? Trust. How do you develop trust? It’s simple: You show your genuine sense of concern for their well-being...We human beings are social animals...and we need friends.” Now Archbishop Tutu joins the conversation, adding, “This God is community, fellowship. Being created by this God, we are created in order to flourish. And we flourish in community. When we become self-centered, turning in on ourselves, as sure as anything, we are going to find one day a deep, deep, deep frustration.”

What if our epidemic of loneliness has a cure? These two wise spiritual masters say this: “The more we turn toward others, the more joy we experience, and the more joy we experience, the more we can bring joy to others...being more joyful is not just about having more fun. We’re talking about a more empathetic, more empowered, even more spiritual state of mind that is totally engaged with the world.”

And listen to the very last paragraph of their book: “The source of true joy is in our relationships with other people.” Both men are embedded in deep and profound spiritual communities that they have nurtured and been nurtured by. Our greatest joy is lived in deep, loving, and generous relationships with others.

We proclaim in our tradition that Christian community was officially born on this day, the day of Pentecost. The eleven disciples were together for this Jewish festival,

fifty days after the Passover, fifty days after the resurrection, shortly after Jesus left his earthly life. The disciples are feeling the absence of Jesus. They seem lost. They have each other, but without Jesus, they're - well, they're lonely. God knows what they need. And God sends spiritual energy, unmistakable, unmissable, unavoidable. Spiritual energy as powerful as fire and wind. And this spiritual energy gives the disciples the ability to speak in different languages.

We've talked before about the Festival of Passover, how Jews came from everywhere, swelling the population of Jerusalem. Well, the same thing happens for the Festival of Pentecost. Jewish people gather from every region, and they hear the disciples speaking. These men from Galilee are speaking languages they never would have known...how is this happening? The crowd moves towards them, just as crowds used to move towards Jesus. The disciples now have the same kind of power Jesus had, spiritual power that naturally attracts people.

Some are skeptical, saying, "Oh, these men must be drunk." But that is not the prevailing opinion. Because people are hearing the good news, with their own ears, in their own languages, and it sounds like truth to them.

Peter, all of a sudden, remembers who he is, claims his identity and the potential Jesus saw in him. He stands and preaches, quoting from the prophet Joel. "This is the time for dreams and visions," Peter says.

This is the story of Pentecost, the day that God breathed new life into the grieving, lonely, lost disciples, and turned them into evangelists, people who would begin to share the story of Jesus, telling others about the life-transforming way Jesus taught and

lived. They were transformed from eleven survivors into a spirit-led and spirit-filled community that we call the church. It's a great story, the story of Pentecost, but the best part of it is what happens next. After Peter preaches that sermon, the book of Acts tells us, 3,000 people choose to be baptized. And then they all begin living together in community, taking care of each other, sharing their possessions, worshiping together in joy.

Isn't it interesting that what the Spirit leads the disciples to do is speak in many languages? The very first thing they do is speak so every single person can hear. They don't ask if everyone is going to agree with them, they don't make people learn their language. This is what it means to be a Christian. You share the good news in a way the other person can hear it. You understand that people speak different languages, that people have different life experiences, and you don't try to change that. You assume those different ways of living and speaking and understanding are gifts from God to be celebrated. You see, the gospel is intended for everyone, not just people who agree with us. Not just people who speak our language or see the world the way we do. The gospel is intended for everyone. The church is at its best when we are most diverse, most welcoming of new perspectives, most respectful of one another's differences.

The Cleveland Orchestra is wrapping up the celebration of its 100th season by performing all of Beethoven's symphonies. Thursday night they performed Beethoven's 9th symphony which includes the fabulous chorus, "Ode to Joy". Friedrich Schiller, who wrote the text "Ode to Joy" called joy "a divine spark". The conductor Franz Welser-

Most wrote this in the program notes: “that [divine] spark [of joy] is deep inside each of us - the knowledge that we all belong together, regardless of our differences.”

It’s hard to imagine a message that is more important for our nation and our world right now than this one. God created a diverse world, and we will only find joy when we honor and respect one another’s differences.

I hadn’t planned on watching the royal wedding. For one thing, I had a very busy day already yesterday. In fact, when I woke up, I forgot it was even taking place. But Doug turned on the TV to record the Cavs game and there it was. I was really interested in Michael Curry’s sermon, as I admire him as one of the American church’s best current leaders. It so happened that Doug turned on the TV about fifteen minutes before the sermon, so I watched, and then I got swept up in the joy of the occasion. The joy of the beauty of that 500-year-old worship space, and the joy of the traditional sounds of the men’s and boy’s choir, and the joy of the gospel choir singing “Stand By Me,” and the 19-year-old cellist. The sounds of familiar hymns accompanied by pipe organ AND the sounds of “This Little Light of Mine.” The whole event, to me, symbolized the current state of our world at its best. It was a Pentecost wedding, where the bride’s family’s traditions were honored as much as the royal groom’s. They have come from different worlds, but they have learned to speak one another’s language. And when we do that, we find that our loneliness dissolves into joy.

At the same time that social scientists are uncovering statistics about loneliness, the Pew Research Center is studying America’s changing religious landscape. Their findings are sobering, to say the least. The fastest-growing religious affiliation in the

United States today is a group calling themselves completely unaffiliated...or “the nones.” They have no connection to any religious organization and many of them have no interest in finding one. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that loneliness is rising at the same time that church participation, nationwide, is declining. If we believe that joy flourishes in community, how can we extend a heartier welcome to those who have already made up their minds that they wouldn’t like church, or who believe that our all Christians are prejudiced and bigoted?

How can we spread the spirit of Pentecost this week? Who do you know who needs community? How can we share the good news, letting people know that there is a church that opens its doors wide to people of different political persuasions and different life experiences? The story of Pentecost is in Acts chapter two. The entire rest of the book of Acts is the story of the spread of the church, because those disciples and those early followers didn’t keep the good news to themselves. Thankfully! because here we are.