

THE SHADOW OF LONELINESS

Matthew 26:36-46

Kelly Boyte Brill
Avon Lake UCC
24 March 2018

We often talk about how God can be experienced in many different ways and in many different places. We sense the presence of God through music and when we're holding a newborn baby. We feel close to God in our favorite places in nature. Our spirituality can grow in a wide variety of circumstances.

Yet there are certain places that feel holier than others. When I went to Israel a little over three years ago, I felt confident that I would feel a sense of sacredness, but I didn't have any idea which of the so-called holy sites would feel that way to me.

The trip made me think about how much of my faith is connected to the person of Jesus, the real-life person whom we know lived in a particular place and time. Being in the actual places where we know he spent time was powerful and moving. One of the first of those sacred places we saw on our trip was the sea of Galilee itself. It's really a lake, and the parts of the shoreline we saw were relatively undeveloped and natural. It was the first place we were where you could imagine that what we were seeing was very similar to what Jesus saw. We took a boat ride and thought to ourselves, "This is an experience Jesus had, over and over again."

Some sites disappointed me. I should have been more prepared, I should have read the guidebooks more closely before we left. Somehow I had the naive expectation that I would be able to stand on the hill where Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount and fed the five thousand. Well, no. There's a church there now. It's a beautiful church, but of course it was built far after the time of the historical Jesus. The church in Jerusalem at the site where Jesus is thought to have been crucified is called the Church of the Holy

Sepulcher. The property is claimed by six different religious groups, and it felt to me like a place where the worst parts of the church are evident - the fighting of various factions, the competing claims of truth. Nothing about it felt holy or sacred to me.

But nearby, there is a place called the Mount of Olives, just a gentle slope of hillside that overlooks the old city of Jerusalem. There is a church on the hillside and next to the church still exists the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus spends the last night of his earthly life. Our tour guide told us that olive trees have been known to live 2,000 years, and the garden itself has been preserved in its natural state.

There were a lot of other tourists there, of course, but people were quiet and respectful. We were in awe, knowing that truly the place where we were standing was holy ground.

This story appears in Matthew, Mark and Luke, with some variations, but in each case, Jesus is portrayed at his most human. It has been quite a week for Jesus. On Sunday he entered the gates of the city of Jerusalem to adoring crowds who threw palm branches down before him, letting him know that they held him in high regard. He's aware that he has followers, but he's keenly aware, too, that the Roman army is watching him around every corner. They entered the city, too, through one of the other gates. They entered with lots of pomp and circumstance, with impressive horses and banners and gleaming swords. They're in the city as it fills to overflowing for the Passover festival. Rome is there to keep the peace and to keep in check any dissenting voices. And they've had their eye on Jesus of Nazareth for some time. He's a threat to Rome. He's popular and unpredictable. He's found a following among other poor people from the region of Galilee and political power is always worried about what might happen if people who have long been disenfranchised suddenly find their voice.

As the week has gone on, Jesus has been made aware that his life is in danger. The rumor he'd heard earlier seems to be true. One of his own group of disciples is going to be the one to officially blow the whistle on him. He says it to the disciples earlier on Thursday, when they're eating the Passover meal together, "One of you will betray me."

After supper, Jesus takes the disciples to the garden where he goes to pray. He takes the three disciples he is closest to - Peter, James and John - and asks them to stay awake while he prays. The gospel writer describes Jesus as sad and anxious. He asks God to intervene - "take this cup of suffering away from me." This is no supernatural heroic Jesus. This is a Jesus showing very real, understandable, human emotions. He doesn't want to die, he doesn't want to physically suffer. Yet he is also the Jesus who has always prayed, this is the Jesus who knows the Hebrew scriptures inside and out, this is the Jesus who strives to remain faithful, so he adds, "Yet, God, not what I want but what you want. Not my will, but your will be done."

He comes back to the disciples and finds them asleep. All of them. Even James and John. Even Peter. He wakes up Peter and says, "Please stay awake this one more hour while I pray. You can do it." This time Jesus prays for strength and acceptance, "God, if this is what's going to happen, help me be ready."

After the second period of prayer, he goes back to the disciples and again, they're asleep. Three times they let him down. Three times they are unable to fulfill his request. Just like three times on Friday, Peter will deny even knowing who Jesus is.

Can you imagine anything more lonely than knowing you are about to die, and asking someone to stay awake with you, and that friend not being able to keep you company?

Loneliness isn't always so evident. If I told you about some of the people who have talked to me about feeling lonely, you'd be surprised. Outgoing people, people are fun to be around...loneliness is an epidemic that affects many of us.

John Cacioppo spent his entire career researching loneliness. He found that loneliness reaches across national borders, racial and ethnic lines and spans all age groups. But the prevalence of loneliness seems to be most acute among young adults, ages 21-30. Some schools are taking this seriously and are beginning to teach loneliness prevention skills. The curriculum would include understanding and practicing empathy and how to read social clues, especially online. John Cacioppo made this important distinction about the social value of the internet. When you use the internet and social media as a way station to relationships, it's helpful...for example, use technology to help you stay in touch with people and make plans to see each other face to face. Don't use technology as destination - a place where you go when you're lonely. Technology as a way station lessens loneliness; technology as a destination increases loneliness.

The number one recommendation in every piece about loneliness which I've read is this: "If you're lonely, do something for someone else." Get involved in an organization which helps others. Tutor adults who don't know how to read. Volunteer with Habitat for Humanity. Spend one evening a month at a soup kitchen. Take the heavy new garbage cans to the curb for your neighbor who has trouble doing it herself. Offer to babysit for a couple with small children. The list is endless. It's not just the fact that you are around other people that eases your loneliness. Noticing the needs of others tends to make you more open to letting others help you in a time of need. We start to create relationships of mutual support...and that begins to feel like the best kind of real human connection.

A journalist, a middle-aged man, was given an assignment last year. "Write a story about loneliness among middle-aged men." I have a feeling some of you will relate to

this personal part of his article: “During the week, much of my waking life revolves around work. Or getting ready for work. Or driving to work. Or driving home from work. Or texting my wife to tell her I’m going to be late getting home from work.

Much of everything else revolves around my kids. I spend a lot of time asking them where their shoes are, and they spend a lot of time asking me when they can have some time with me. It makes me feel guilty every time I hear it, because they are asking it in moments when they know I cannot give it to them — when I am distracted by an e-mail on my phone or I’m dealing with the constant, boring logistics of running a home.

We can usually squeeze in an hour of “quality time” before bed — mostly wrestling or reading books — and so the real “quality time” happens on weekends. That’s my promise. “I have to go to work, but this weekend,” I tell them, “we can have ‘quality time.’”

I love my time with my kids. And I’m pretty good about squeezing in an hour of “me time” each day for exercise, which usually means getting up before dawn to go to the gym or for a run. But when everything adds up, there is no real “friend time” left. Yes, I have friends at work and at the gym, but those are accidents of proximity. I rarely see those people anywhere outside those environments, because when everything adds up, I have left almost no time for friends.”

One of the reasons we schedule so many social activities here at the church is NOT because we think people need more to do, but ENTIRELY because we want you to meet each other. Whether it’s at Coffee Hour or CrossTraining or cornhole or serving on one of our teams, we want you to get to know each other. Then maybe some of you will find a common interest and want to do something together - golfing or out to dinner or

playing euchre - we know that developing friendships at any age and stage of life can be challenging. I sincerely hope that church can help.

Matthew's gospel begins and ends with the word "WITH." In the first chapter, Jesus is described as "Immanuel" which means, "God is with us." In the last chapter, Jesus says, "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." The story of Jesus is the story of God who is WITH us, in human form. God knows what our loneliness is like because Jesus himself has experienced it.

It would be tempting to close this sermon with this pat remark: "Because of Jesus, because of God in flesh form, we never have to be lonely again." On one level, I deeply believe that to be true, but that sentence is not enough. The truth is, loneliness is a part of life. We have all been lonely, and we will be again. The more robust our relationship with God, the more spiritually practiced we are, the better able we will be to withstand those times of loneliness. The other truth is this - Jesus didn't just leave us with his spirit. Jesus left us with this gift of community. The church is a unique community of people who are called together, not because we think alike or vote alike, but because we are seeking to walk in the ways of Jesus. Creating a vibrant, inclusive, healthy community is the work of a lifetime. Within the bonds of this community, we can be real with one another, trusting one another with our stories, bringing out the best in each other, and discovering in one another the light that dispels the shadow of loneliness.