

“Love Your Neighbor as a Cure for Loneliness” by Margreata Silverstone



Twenty-second Sunday After Pentecost

October 29, 2023

When I signed up to preach today, I did not check what the lectionary passages were. I simply had been struck by a message that I needed to share and this was the first Sunday that was open. Frankly, I am not sure I would have had the gall on my own to pick the Sunday with the Greatest Commandment and the Second Like it. Yet, the message that has been in my heart fits.

I will confess I will be holding up a challenge which I do not always follow myself. Not through lack of effort, but that my energy and focus and will do not always align with the

commandment. I do not always love God with my full heart and mind and strength. I get tired. My heart is full with sorrow and grief. And at the end of the day my emotional and physical strength have been spent. Certainly I don't always love my neighbor as much as I love myself. Sometimes that gets cut short because I don't love myself. When I am in one of those moods, where I look in the mirror and think I am just fat and lazy and privileged, it is hard to think loving thoughts towards myself. Thinking of loving thoughts of others? Where is love supposed to come from when it isn't inside me?

In September, a New York Times opinion piece alerted me to a US government issued report with some important research for me and Seekers to consider.

The Surgeon General's Advisory on Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation – PDF was issued on May 3, 2023 and is now gathering some attention in the news cycles. As Vivek Murthy, the Surgeon General says, "Our epidemic of loneliness and isolation has been an underappreciated public health crisis that has harmed individual and societal health."

Social isolation and loneliness are related, but they are not the same. Social isolation is objectively having few social relationships, social roles, group memberships, and infrequent social interaction. On the other hand, loneliness is a subjective internal state. It's the distressing experience that

results from perceived isolation or unmet need between an individual's preferred and actual experience. (p.8)

When I came back from Washington State, I came back to an empty home. The cat and I got back into some level of routine those first few days. I could not help initially notice the noise of the crickets at night and that the house was dark.

With the weather reflecting the coming of the tropical storm Ophelia, the darkness impacted my mood. I had just come from a home with lots of windows that had looked out over Birch Bay and the Cascades and had been sunny. Attending Seekers that Sunday, a lot of church people were on silent retreat. I recognized I was feeling lonely. I had other moments over the past 2 years, when surrounded by family, I still felt lonely. Granted, part of that was about being with people now as just a single person, not along with a spouse or a child/young adult. In a conversation with another Seeker, they identified the loneliness they had felt in being at Silent Retreat where the setting reminded them of their departed spouse.

One of the studies included in the report is from Cigna and they identified that over 50% of the US population has named feeling lonely (p.9). A marked increase over time, certainly exasperated by the Covid-19 pandemic, and still impacting the population. It isn't just among the elderly. Loneliness is rising among teenagers as well.

The report identified a number of factors which may be contributing to the increase in loneliness and social isolation. The increasing secularization of US society is resulting in less connection fostered by churches. The number of people engaged in civic organizations has also decreased. There has been a 100% increase in single person households over the past 50 years (p. 15). While brushing your teeth together in the bathroom is not the best opportunity for connection, the daily routines of life together do build connections.

I assume here at Seekers we may be not so different from overall society in our individual experiences of loneliness. While ministry teams and mission groups can help to broaden and deepen our social connection, ergo preventing or dissuading loneliness and isolation, how do we care for those who do not participate in these structures? How do we support the numerous single person households that we have here in

Seekers? Where will the single person be on Thanksgiving or Christmas or New Year's Eve?

If the statistics on the increase of loneliness is not enough to alert me and us to a problem, the health impacts of loneliness are yet another warning. Loneliness and social isolation kills.

Loneliness and social isolation increase the risk for premature death by 26% and 29% respectively. (p. 8)

A synthesis of data across 16 independent longitudinal studies shows poor social relationships (social isolation, poor social support, loneliness) were associated with a 29% increase in the risk of heart disease and a 32% increase in the risk of stroke. (p. 20)

Loneliness and social isolation have impacts on high blood pressure, anxiety levels, diabetes and the list goes on. Young or old, the impact can linger for decades.

Chronic loneliness and social isolation can increase the risk of developing dementia by approximately 50% in older adults. (p. 28)

After having read the report and reading the gospel text, the commandment to love one another is not simply a benefit for the "neighbor", building a social connection with my neighbor benefits both of us. Love your neighbor as yourself.

So who is my neighbor? In the oꞑertory, you'll hear Bruce Cockburn's reflection on that. (Bruce Cockburn, Orders – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WEIcSbMR2WA&pp=ygUVYnJlY2UgY29ja2Jlcm4gb3JkZXJz>)

While not part of the gospel reading today, many of us know other teachings of Jesus about his definition of neighbor and what actions are called for to be a neighbor. Jesus identifies that our neighbor is not confined to our same age, race,

economic status, community social position or standard of health. Jesus also expected that loving our neighbor may mean getting our hands dirty – picking up the wounded stranger, putting them into our vehicle and getting them to a hospital, paying for their expenses while they recover. Loving our neighbors as Jesus requests is time consuming and messy. What I also value in the story of the Samaritan is that it was a time bound incident – we do not hear of having to stay engaged and involved in that person's life. Aid was given and the person offering the help moved on to the next task. We have many neighbors with many different needs and each needs love and connection.

Jesus' discussion of the greatest commandments was not given to just one individual. It was a conversation with the Pharisees. As one source identified, the Pharisees were mainly middle class business people and leaders in the religious establishment. They weren't the majority population of the establishment but did seem to hold sway in decision making. Maybe Stewards are the functional equivalent? How might taking the command to love our neighbors as a church body change our collective behavior?

There are benefits to reducing social isolation and loneliness for more than just individual health, the report identified overall societal/group benefits from reaching out and building stronger social connections that can combat loneliness and isolation, particularly if the connections cross social boundaries – age, race, power status, economic status. There is improved community health and well-being as there are benefits of reduced crime and better overall economic status for all geographic community members.

In addition, interacting with people from diverse backgrounds can help to stimulate creative thinking and encourage the consideration of different perspectives, leading to better problem-solving and decision-making. (p.38)

Our church history also supports this – there are stories that some can tell of visiting John Westerho and learning the benefits of multi-generations in a church. The questions and life experiences of each generation enrich us all. Racial and ethnic diversity also allow us to see experiences from different perspectives and hear the gospel / good news in new ways.

On Friday afternoons in front of Seekers, I see diversity go by.

I will confess that I have generally felt ill at ease with my Friday afternoon standing in front of Seekers with a sign. It would be better for me to have taken some action during the week to End Police Violence rather than just hold up the sign. I would have more integrity if I had done something that either the Community Action Network or the Silver Spring Justice Coalition had recommended (both these local organizations include actions to address police violence and receive money from Seekers). A bigger step would be to volunteer with a victim rights organization.

It is easy for me to get hard on myself about the thousands of things I am not doing. Jesus loved the widow's pennies in the offering plate. My holding a sign is a

first step in naming an intention. Seekers being out there every Friday is a small token of building awareness of our physical community and a place that we have in it.

Small actions, at the societal level, matter. Small demonstrations of love matter. The small greeting and polite conversation can lead to building small connections, developing slowly into a level of trust and empathy. And empathy can further generate actions of altruism and deeper connection. A cup of water when water may be in short supply is a lifeline. Standing with signs is a good start, the question is what steps do we take next to include the

neighbors who walk, bike or drive by? How do we show that our love for our neighbor is more than a sign?

Maybe our second step can be invitations to actions that put meaning to the signs we hold up. Community meals where we hear each other's stories connected to the experiences named on the signs. Or even just community meals with nothing planned other than simply building better connections. I hope you can come on November 10 at 6:30pm for a simple meal and board games as a way to do just that. Can you think of other actions?

I am called to love my neighbor. We are called to love our neighbors. How can we do that so that we create a healthier and better community for all – creating the realm of God here now?