

Psalm 139:1-12

O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.

Ecclesiastes 4:9–12 (New Revised Standard Version)

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.

This week I got a new cookbook from the library. It is Ina Garten's *Modern Comfort Food*. I'm looking through all of the recipes and she has stories before each section. In the main dishes section, she tells about her friend Jack who is a physician specializing in geriatrics, or the care of older people. Jack shared a story with her about asking his Columbia medical school class to interview an older patient to determine their life expectancy. He instructs the students to not bother asking about their diagnoses, diet, or exercise, which are the first things you'd think would be relevant, right? Instead, he wants the students to focus on two things: first, how many people has the person interacted with over the past week? Do they have friends they see, family that drops in on them? Second, do they have hobbies and interests they're engaged in? Are they involved with any charities? Do they travel, garden, have pets, or play cards regularly with friends? What Jack found has been confirmed by research studies, loneliness is an epidemic in this country and may be a more important predictor of longevity than diet and exercise. This was in a cookbook!

We don't talk about loneliness in church, and we are hesitant to mention our loneliness even with close friends. This month we have talked about things that you don't normally hear about in church, addiction, mental health, racism, sexuality and today loneliness. Loneliness is pervasive, and is especially acute during this past pandemic year. Some people don't talk to another human being all day or even all week. The life of a Christian is not a solo act.

When we are lonely, we have to reach out because people don't know what is going on with us unless we tell them. Writer and preacher Rob Bell says, "despair is the fear that tomorrow will be just like today." We have the ability to change tomorrow by reaching out to someone today. We think that when we reach out we are a burden, but people want to help and if the person you reach out to doesn't help, reach out to someone else. You are not a burden. You are good and holy and deserving of love and support.

Psalm 139 that we sang together today is a song of remembering that we are beloved children of God. God loves us and wants good things for us. The words from Ecclesiastes are so powerful to me because they remind me that I can't do life alone. I have to reach out and connect with others because then I feel known. Two are better than one because when you fall, one will lift up the other. A three fold cord is not quickly broken.

I remember a wise pastor once telling me that you put yourself out there and after you get stomped on enough times, you don't want to put yourself out there. We are afraid, so we protect ourselves by isolating ourselves. People hurt us, so we stay away from people. Boundaries are good and important, but sometimes in my own life I find that I am hesitant to make new friends when an old friend has hurt me. I am hesitant to meet new neighbors after a beloved neighbor moves away. My aunt passed away a few months ago and as we have been cleaning out her home I keep thinking about how hard family gatherings will be because fun Aunt Sally won't be there. I actually had the thought that maybe we should skip the annual Thanksgiving meal because it will be too hard. It's hard to imagine life without the physical presence of someone that you love.

Did you know that social acceptance and connection is reinforced by our brain chemistry? The pain that results from social rejection and disconnection is real pain. As far as the brain is concerned, physical pain, that is, the kind of pain associated with spilling a hot cup of coffee on your hand, and the intense experiences of social rejection hurt in the same way. The same part of the brain lights up when we experience physical pain and when we experience social rejection.¹ So, we decide we don't want to risk getting hurt. Who wants to feel the pain of hot coffee on your hand if you don't have to!

Research tells us that nearly half of Americans feel alone or left out.² People don't have a place where they can find love, joy and peace in a welcoming community. A few years ago in February 2019 we had a special worldwide Methodist meeting talking about human sexuality. Methodists spent three days debating LGBTQ people. We know that a person cannot be debated and never should be, but that is what happened.

At that meeting, delegates from all over the world voted 53% to 47% to tighten the restrictions on same gender marriage in our churches and on gay clergy. Yes, the Methodist Church believes that all persons are of sacred worth, but the church also says a Methodist church can't have same gender weddings. People felt betrayed and rejected. I have to tell you I sunk into a pretty deep depression after that meeting. The previous fall in October 2018, Greenland Hills had an all-church consensus where Greenland Hills overwhelmingly agreed that they desired to host **all** weddings. We asked **all** church members to vote, 76% of church members did, and 99% voted that they desired **all** weddings to take place at Greenland Hills. After that awful worldwide meeting, the next Sunday we had a wonderful meeting in Glory Be Hall where people held their hands up proudly in support of marrying **all** the people right now. Greenland Hills will not hurt people, people we love, people in this church.

I spent weeks trying to rationalize being a pastor in the United Methodist Church. I would tell myself that the United Methodist Church is just as divided as our country. I would tell myself 43% of the 864 delegates at this worldwide meeting came from overseas, mostly Africa, but that didn't help. In the end I just felt alone. I was surrounded by you wonderful people and I felt desperately lonely. Here I was blessed to be the pastor at a church that is a refuge, a safe place, a sanctuary for people who are hurting and looking for community and searching to hear a message that God loves them exactly how they are. But, I felt like the larger church that we are a part of, of which I am a clergyperson, the United Methodist Church had broken my heart. The brokenness of the UMC was out in the open for all to see. I didn't want to reach out to my pastor friends, I wanted to walk away. I didn't know how I could have integrity and look myself in the

¹<https://brenebrown.com/podcast/brene-on-shame-and-accountability/>

² <https://www.cigna.com/newsroom/news-releases/2018/new-cigna-study-reveals-loneliness-at-epidemic-levels-in-america>

mirror if I was a pastor in the United Methodist Church. I felt like I was a part of the harm by continuing to be a pastor in the UMC.

Eventually, I did reach out to my clergy friends. We talked about other churches that we could join. I met with my boss, the District Superintendent, and shared with her that we had nineteen families stop giving and stop coming to the church. We had forty families who didn't want their giving, representing one-third of our budget, going to the larger UMC. People didn't feel like they could continue in this church and stand for justice. We couldn't be a church that celebrated all people and still be Methodist, but we couldn't afford financially to leave the Methodist church because of pension and building issues. We also didn't want to leave the Methodist church because there is so much good in being a United Methodist Church. There are hospitals all over the world that are funded by the Methodist Church. There is disaster relief funded by the Methodist Church. There is so much more that is good and needed. The money we pay to the United Methodist Church funds wonderful things all over the world.

Lea Anne Hicks told me about growing up as a Methodist when she was the youth representative on their Administrative Board. She saw how the \$8 her church sent to the larger Methodist church went to a group offering AIDS relief. All of the small contributions from all of the Methodist churches raised tens of thousands for the program helping her understand how together we can reach further.

Today at 12:15 p.m. Rev. Sid Hall, pastor at Trinity Church in Austin will talk about his church's journey to become a Union church with the UMC and the UCC. His church is both UMC and UCC and those different designations are really important for people in his church who don't want to identify as UMC. The UCC structure allows every church to decide for itself what is best for them. They ordain gay clergy and host same-gender weddings. They are a progressive, social justice-oriented denomination. At Greenland Hills we are just beginning this conversation of being UMC and UCC to see if it will help us transform into what God desires for us to be. I want to invite you all to join the Zoom at 12:15 pm today with Rev. Sid Hall to hear about his church's journey. As you listen to Sid, see if the words from Ecclesiastes "a three fold cord is not quickly broken" apply. Let me know what you determine.

Loneliness is a feeling of sadness that comes from a sense of social isolation, when you feel like you don't have any companions on the journey. Two are better than one because when you fall, one will lift up the other. When we feel lonely, we withdraw more which is self-defeating because we are wired for connection, we crave community. We have to risk putting ourselves out there in order to get connected with others. We have to reach out because we are loved and we are not alone. Last week I was leaving the church and there was no one around. I was feeling down, it's winter and I don't like the cold and I am so very tired of this pandemic. Then I saw Russell Faulhaber and Mary Salter. They were both walking around the neighborhood, being healthy, and connecting with one another. In a matter of seconds, I was filled with joy. We all need community and connection.

I love St. Augustine's words that he wrote in 400 A.D. God, "You have made us for yourself; our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you." God created us for relationship, for connection with God and for relationship with other people. God is always with us as Psalm 139 reminds us, "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?... If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast." Thanks be to God, Amen.