

Loneliness, Tribes, and Pentecost May 28, 2023

There is a new study that came out from the Surgeon General a couple weeks ago. The Reading Eagle actually featured an article about it in last Sunday's paper.

It is stunning to read. The report talked about a problem in our world today, an issue that is tied to (and maybe causing) a lot of difficulties facing our society.

This thing leads to:

- higher rates of depression and anxiety
- increased risk of high blood pressure, heart disease, and stroke,
- shortened life expectancy
- increased risk of dementia, weakened immune response

If I heard that, I would say it's got to be smoking. It's not smoking.

I might also worry that it's sugar consumption, but thankfully, it's not that either (my Nutella and Twizzler stashes are safe).

The issue is loneliness. It's crazy, but loneliness poses more of a health risk than obesity, smoking, or diabetes. We have anti-smoking campaigns! We have the American Lung Association! We have a booming weight-loss industry! But we don't really talk about loneliness.

So the Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, shared his recommendations. Dr. Murthy said that the most important thing you can do for your physical health isn't about:

- eating well
- exercising regularly
- getting enough sleep (although those all are important)

The most important thing you can do for your physical health is to "build a culture of connection" – be kind, respect the people around you, serve others, talk honestly about loneliness.

That can be done, he says, in 15 minutes a day. Answer a phone call from a friend. Make time to share a meal with someone. Put down your phone. Express yourself authentically.

Vivek Murthy. "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community." 2023. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>.

This is the Surgeon General talking! Sounds a little bit like Jesus. Today, we hear that Jesus appears to his disciples, who are in a locked room. And he says to them: "Get out of this building, and go to people. I am sending you. Forgive people who hurt you. You have that power of forgiveness and healing." Powerful.

So that report came out about 3 weeks ago. As it happens, I was reading a book at the time called *Tribe*, by Sebastian Junger. The basic premise of the book is that human beings evolved as communal creatures who lived in tribes and were rarely (if ever) alone.

Today, though, we live alone or in very small family groups. We live individualistic lives. And we face historically high rates of depression and anxiety. Strangely enough, depression rates are highest not in the populations we might expect: the economically poor, those who are struggling to make ends meet. They're highest in the middle and upper classes.

Even more strangely, crisis provokes an unusual response in us. We might think that a crisis would increase levels of anxiety. In reality, emergencies or hardships force people to pull together, to say, "This is my tribe." And when that happens, loneliness and anxiety and depression not only decrease, but they almost disappear.

For example, after September 11, you might remember a sense of community and camaraderie unlike anything we'd experienced in decades. As it turned out, in New York City, for the 6 months following 9/11, suicides decreased, the number of crimes decreased, and those who were struggling with PTSD actually found a decrease in their symptoms.

Sebastian Junger, *Tribes: On Homecoming and Belonging*, Ebook (New York: Hachette, 2016) 127.

Crisis demands community and solidarity; and community establishes mental well-being.

This fact also shows up in the loneliness report. A significant increase in social connectedness is correlated with a large decrease in violent crime.

Yet today, when there's a violent act committed, people often point to problems in our mental health system (usually to avoid other obvious causes). Mental health is the scapegoat, and the implication is that if we had more psychologists, counselors, or doctors, then we wouldn't have violent acts.

I agree that having better mental health care would be wonderful, but that's our leaders passing the buck.

What we need is a society where neighbors talk to each other, like Dr. Murthy said. Where our elected leaders live in the neighborhoods with and with the same standard of living as the people they represent. Where community is the norm and separation is unheard of.

Instead, we have a system that economist Michael Sandel called "Skyboxification." Your reward for loyalty or for spending money with a certain company is SOLITUDE. You don't have to mingle with the masses.

Sandel, Michael J. *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2012.

If you pay more money, you can be alone. You can have that skybox at the baseball game. You can sit in the quiet of the Delta Platinum Lounge at the airport. You can swim at the country club instead of at the public pool. You can skip the line at the amusement park.

Is it wrong to sit in a skybox or rest in the Diamond Lounge? No. But I do think it is wrong and damaging for Delta to create a system where the reward for loyalty is solitude. I think it's wrong for country clubs or amusement parks to turn solitude into a prized commodity. Because that reward system makes being alone seem valuable.

What we know now is that this system is actually hurting people's physical well-being. I can't image telling someone from a tribal society that your reward for a heroic deed is to be alone. That's a punishment (and a pretty bad one, at that.)

We need an economy where the reward for having money isn't solitude, isn't the ability to seclude yourself, to avoid mingling with the peons of society. We need a system where community is a given, unrelated to wealth or ability.

Why do I share all this today? Because today is Pentecost. Today, in our reading from Acts, we hear about the Holy Spirit coming to the members of the Jesus movement.

I'd like to read a few lines from Acts again.

"When the day of Pentecost had come, the disciples were all together in one place."

"Divided tongues that looked like fire appeared, and a tongue rested on each of them."

"All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit."

"Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem."

"In the last days, I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh."

"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

The Holy Spirit not for Platinum Elite members only. It's not just for those who belong to the club, who knew Jesus. It's not just for the people who have over 1,000 followers. The author of Acts goes to great lengths to show us that the Holy Spirit is poured out on everyone.

Men, women. Slave and free. Oppressors (Romans) and the oppressed. People who live in our country and people who don't.

From its founding, the Christian body has been a community to which everyone can belong. Rich and poor, young and... well-seasoned, people with quiet children, people with loud children, people with no children; employed and unemployed; young families and widows; those who stand firm in their beliefs and those who have so many doubts that they're not sure what they believe.

And especially when it comes to money, the Church is not a skybox.

- For those who contribute thousands of dollars to church, to their community, to causes, you are welcome here. This is your home. You belong.
- For those who don't have a dollar to spare, who live paycheck to paycheck: you are welcome here. This is your home. You belong.
- Going one step further, for those who have thousands of dollars of debt (student loans, mortgages, credit card bills), those who lose sleep at night wondering how you're going to pay it all off, let alone how to give money to a church: you are welcome here. This is your home. You belong.

You carry the Holy Spirit in you. You are a member of the body of Christ simply because you were created by God. And you are a part of this community because you are seeking Jesus, and you deserve to do it with other people at your side.

The trade-off, if we're being practical, is that at church, we ask for money. We don't have membership dues or admission prices, or if you pay extra, you can sit in the Diamond Lounge at the front of the church. Just kidding, the Diamond Lounge would obviously be in the back; and then the peons would have to sit up front.

So we ask for money. It costs money to run ministry and pay staff, and the truth is that during the summer, giving decreases. It's part of the rhythm of the church – people travel and attendance goes down a bit, which is normal. Unfortunately, our bills do not decrease in the summer. So if I can make an appeal, it is that you donate to St. Gabriel's if you are able, especially through the next couple months, by mailing a check to church or donating online.

If you are not able to give right now, that's okay.

I'll admit, it's not my favorite part of being a priest to make an appeal, but I'll tell you, I'd rather ask for money every couple months than practice the business model of Delta or baseball stadiums. I want to be clear that money and belonging are not at all connected. You are a part of Jesus' family because of who you are.

So as we talk about community and loneliness and belonging, there are opportunities.

If you see a need or a possibility for community — for coffee gatherings on Tuesday nights, for an adult dodgeball league in Adams Hall, for a pub theology group at Douglassville Hotel — talk to me. I think it would be wonderful if the church could foster or provide a space for community.

Because that is how we are wired. God created us to be together. God poured out the Spirit on everyone so that no one should be excluded. That is the power of Pentecost.

Amen.