

1 “Living with courage and hope” is a phrase that looks good on a book cover or in the description of a worship series. Honestly appraising our lives and making the changes necessary to live into that is another story. No book or sermon series can take away all your fears. But every journey begins with one step, so perhaps this morning God will inspire you to take a step forward in your courage and hopefulness.

Last week I shared with you my definition of courage: “Choosing to see difficult choices or circumstances in the light of God’s Word, acting in the strength, comfort, and purpose of God’s Spirit, and intentionally living out and sharing the hope that comes through faith in Jesus.” This week, I’ll remind you of what the Bible says faith is: confidence in what we hope for.¹ And what do we hope for? We hope that life is about so much more than just getting up in the morning, taking a shower, getting dressed, eating breakfast, and then going through the motions until we do it all in reverse at the end of the day. Our hope is that we don’t have to live each day in fear of what lies ahead, with one eye open and the other eye shut. Our hope is that we worship a living, present God who walks our days with us, speaks to us, loves us, forgives us, and invites us to join in God’s grand plan for bringing the joy and Spirit of Christ to all people. And our hope is that at the end of this life, we’ll come to experience an intimacy with God that this life is only an imperfect foreshadowing of.

God’s love is big enough and strong enough to tackle even the most complicated and intractable of the potholes of our lives. So let’s take another step with God, learning to live with courage and hope.

2 What do you see when you look at this picture? I’m hoping that most of us see someone standing alone in the rain. But can you see beyond the picture to the feeling underlying the drawing? I see the feeling of loneliness, perhaps you see something else. There are several different ideas that we need to untangle this morning: Being alone; feeling lonely; and being afraid of either being alone or being lonely. I’m guessing that those conditions aren’t strangers to us, that most of us have at least been alone or felt lonely at times in our lives. Before we look further into God’s word, let’s take a moment to reflect on

¹ Hebrews 11:1

where we're at this morning. When you came in this morning, you should have received one of these half-sheets of paper with a sample of some of the questions from the UCLA Loneliness Scale.² The instructions are simple. For each of the eight questions listed, respond with a number from 1 to 4. For example, on the first question, if you never feel alone, write "1." If you always feel alone, write "4." After you answer all eight questions, total up the points. The smallest score you can give yourself is "8," and the highest is "32." This is just for you and your savior, so be as honest with yourself as possible. Go ahead and complete the eight items now.

{Pause about a minute and a half}

Scoring this isn't rocket science. If your score is 16 or below, then what you're telling yourself is that in general, you seldom or never experience loneliness. On the other hand, if your score is 24 or higher, you're reporting that you sometimes or even always feel lonely. Don't freak out about your score, a high score doesn't mean you're crazy. But it might mean that you're in need of some help, from your savior, your sisters and brothers in Christ, and possibly someone in one of the helping professions. I encourage you to take your sheet home with you and revisit it in prayer, thanking God for the times you haven't been lonely, and asking God for help in the times you do.

3 In one sense, loneliness is completely normal because God made us with a built-in need for relationship- with other people and with God. A big part of what made the Garden of Eden so perfect was that Adam and Eve walked in the garden with each other and with God. I don't know if there were elephants in Eden, but I do know that Genesis 2 is the first account in the Biblical story of creation where God calls something not good. What was it? Let's see if you can pick it out as I read from Genesis 2, verses 7, and 15-23 in the New Living Translation.

{Read Genesis 2:7, 15-23, NLT}

"It is not good for the man to be alone." God's last great creative act in Genesis was made out of a blunt acknowledgement that we need the companionship of not only God, but

² <http://sparqtools.org/mobility-measure/ucla-loneliness-scale-version-3/#all-survey-questions>

also other people. It may be possible to feel lonely in a crowd, but even the most die-hard introvert like myself requires some regular contact with a community of people to be whole.

4 It shouldn't surprise us that God made us to be in relationship, because we know that God's very nature is relational. We believe that God is both one God but also with three distinct personalities. It's common to talk about God as three "persons," the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit- not because God is a person like you and me, but because each part of God has unique names, unique responsibilities, and even unique personalities. We often pray to God the Father, as we do in the Lord's Prayer. We Speak of God the Holy Spirit who tugs at our heartstrings and inspires us to goodness. We know Jesus as the Son, who was born of a woman but who also existed prior to the beginning of time. All three are God, weaving in and out of the Biblical story and our lives in a beautiful, eternal dance of glory. It's therefore impossible for God to be alone or lonely, with the possible exception of that moments when Jesus cried out to his Father from the cross of Calvary, "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?"³

5 Immunity to loneliness is not an automatic benefit of God's people. King David lamented his loneliness in the Psalms, like in this selection from Psalm 25: "Turn to me and have mercy, for I am alone and in deep distress. My problems go from bad to worse. Oh, save me from them all! Feel my pain and see my trouble."⁴ God's prophets, like Jeremiah, were often set apart and lonely. You can imagine how popular these guys were with the crowds when they showed up and predicted calamity for the nation if the king didn't turn away from unjust rule. Jeremiah wasn't shy about speaking his heart to God, like in this lament from Jeremiah 15: "What sorrow is mine, my mother. Oh, that I had died at birth! I am hated everywhere I go. I am neither a lender who threatens to foreclose or a borrower who refuses to pay—yet they all curse me."⁵

6 What can we do about loneliness, a condition that God has called "not good?" It won't surprise you to learn that the most significant acts you can take to alleviate your loneliness are ones that reach out- to God, and to others. It's unfortunate that when we're

³ Matthew 27:46 (Psalm 22:1), New Revised Standard Version.

⁴ Psalm 25:16-18, New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

⁵ Jeremiah 15:10, Ibid

lonely, we often do the exact opposite of what has the most potential to help us. We hide away from people, and we stop talking with God. Someone gave me this great little book called two chairs. Basically, the author advocates starting every day by setting out two chairs- one for yourself, and the other for God. The two chairs routine reminds you that you don't have to walk your day alone. Daily prayer doesn't magically erase the pain of losing a child or a spouse, but it does open a door for God to offer you companionship and solace. Consider giving that a try this week: Start each morning by setting out two chairs, sitting in one and having a conversation with God. And if you're not lonely, you can pray for someone who is. I'd love to hear from you how it goes.

7 Here's another simple idea for you. The Buffalo Rotary recently heard a presentation about the "Just Say Hello" campaign that's coming to the Buffalo schools. The basic idea is that wherever you go, you can change your life, and the life of someone else for the better, simply by looking at them and saying "Hello." We all have a basic need to know others and be known by others. Greeting others with a smile reinforces that need we have to be acknowledged by others.

One of you told me a story that illustrates the power of saying hello. I'll call her Mary. Mary was walking into one of the care homes in town to visit someone- you know how that goes, right? You're on a schedule, you know the room you're headed for, and along the way you wind up passing by seniors, some moving behind walkers, many sitting in wheel chairs. Maybe you smile, maybe you say hello, but I'm guessing you don't stop to chat. On this particular day, Mary noticed a woman sitting in her wheel chair as she walked in, so Mary smiled and said hello. Something prompted her to take it one step further, and she stopped and asked, "And how are you today?" The woman responded, "I'm doing wonderful today!" "And why is that?" Mary asked. "Because you stopped and talked to me," she said.

I don't know anything about that woman Mary spoke with. I don't know if she's got a hole in her heart that's aching from loneliness. But I know she's a human being with a human need to be seen and acknowledged. Mary gave her that gift, just by saying hello and asking her how her day was going. And Mary gave herself a gift, simply by have a short, face-to-face contact with another human being. How simple is that? Give it a try this week and see what happens.



Buffalo United Methodist Church



...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!

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