BUFFALO UNITED METHODIST

Sun June 14 Please Hold On | Ecclesiastes 4:9–12 and Hebrews 10:24–25

Susan in The Amen Effect, lovingly describes her neighbor, Sarge as a sweet-tempered army vet in his 80s, with a gentle laugh and an ageless charm.

She tells of a time that shortly after the pandemic began in the spring of 2020. Her and her son Levi went to check on Sarge and his wife, to see if they needed groceries. He was grateful for the company, and Susan and her son were grateful to stand at a safe distance.

But at one point while they were chatting, Sarge lost his balance and fell to the ground. Even as they rushed to lift him up, they realized that their attempt to help, that physical touch may have been more dangerous than the fall itself.

And yet, she asked, **"What would have been the perils of not reaching out at all?"**

Also, in the spring of 2020 at the beginning of the pandemic, my dad, who was 86, his health began to fail. I quickly moved him from Bemidji to Fargo, into assisted living and begin cancer treatments.

Moving him during the pandemic was intense. But I didn't realize how hard it would be to help him get the care he needed. Nor the anguish in how much I would not be able to see him with multiple quarantine procedures.

On top of that, I knew I could be infecting him every time I visited him. But every part of my heart and soul screamed I had to help my dad.

As we know, the pandemic brought a tsunami-sized wave of uncertainty and grief slamming into our world. Made exponentially worse by the loss of physical closeness and touch. We were stripped of one of our best tools for connection, loving physical presence.

Who could have grasped at the time the spiritual and emotional void created in a world with distancing and without touch? How could we have known? There was no way of knowing would happen to our hearts when we simply couldn't show up for one another.

When God delivered the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt, 10 plagues had to descend upon the land first, each worse than the last. Just before the last plague of the death of the firstborn sons, came the plague of darkness.

Susan questioned, **“Why was darkness the second to the last plague?”** Darkness can be inconvenient, frightening, and dangerous. But is it really worse than the Nile River, their main waters supply turning to blood? Is darkness worse than boils, burning hail, frogs or lice?

Exodus 10:23 describes three full days of impenetrable darkness, **“No one could see anyone else or move about for three days.”** It is this detail that hints at the real terror.

They could not see each other. They could not reach each other. They could not comfort each other. They were trapped in isolation. The horror wasn't merely the darkness. It was the separation.

More than physical discomfort, darkness brought spiritual and emotional anguish.

Before we go much further into the second chapter of Susan’s book, entitled “Please Hold On”, it makes sense to pause, provide context and remind ourselves of what we are trying to achieve in our new sermon series.

We often us the word “Amen” like a period or exclamation point of a statement. We treat it as a conclusion but in this sermon series it is really an agreement. It is a shared response that says, “W*e are in this together*!” And, “*We will be changed by what we have heard*!”

In the upcoming weeks, we will explore what happens when communities learn to say “Amen” not just with their lips, but with their lives. It is what can happen when we as a church choose presence over absence, connection and community repair over isolation, and shared life over quiet withdrawal.

It is about being committed to show up for one another. It is about having the courage to believe that community is not accidental. It is spiritual work we each must do. When we say “Amen” together, we are not ending something. We agree to begin again, together.

Today’s sermon is about reminding us as individuals to, “Please hold on”. Please hold to your faith in God and trust God is working out deliverance, hope, and comfort for you no matter what you are facing.

And remind us as a church family to also, “Please hold on”. Hold on to the good works God is doing in our midst and the good works he has yet for us to do.

And as a church family, hold on to one another when things become impenetrably dark. Affirming the antidote to loneliness is sacred connection.

If darkness was the 9th plague and the death of the firstborn son was the 10th, then I might say the Covid Pandemic was the 12th plague. And the 11th plague? Loneliness.

And loneliness…the silent plague, here long before Covid and sticking around, was made so much worse by the physical, emotional, and spiritual distancing brought on by the pandemic.

Over the last 20 years or so there has been groundbreaking work done on the effects of loneliness not only on our bodies and spirits but also on society. The U.S. Surgeon General describes loneliness as, **"the subjective feeling that we are lacking the social connections we need."**

In Genesis, in the beginning, when God made all things…calling all things seen and unseen into existence, oceans and rivers, mountains and stars, time and gravity and quarks; after each day God declared, "That is good!"

And when God made us in his image, God declared, "Now, that is very good!".

But a break in the pattern of proclaiming goodness occurs on the sixth day when Adam is left without a partner. There is only one thing explicitly described as "not good", Adam's aloneness.

Laster in Exodus chapter 18, Jethro rebukes Moses for taking on too much of the burdens of leadership. "You cannot do this alone!"

I love what Sharon shared about creation. She asked that when the sun set on the end of the sixth day, as the sky blackens did Adam panic? Did he wonder if he did something wrong?

But then Eve arrives and they hold each other. Together they realize this is the way of the world, each day darkness falls.

Teaching us two things…first you cannot escape darkness. And secondly, when that darkness comes who will be sitting next to you to share your worries?

Brene Brown puts it this way, **"We are psychologically, emotionally, cognitively and spiritually hardwired for connection, love and belonging. These are irreducible needs of all people. It's what gives purpose and meaning to our lives. The absence of love, belonging, connection always leads to suffering."**

Biologists, neurologists, psychologists, therapists, and pastors all attest to the same fundamental truth: we need connection.

As much as we might say as Americans in our Declaration of Independence, "…**We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all humanity is created equal"**; it is equally true in our Declaration of Dependence, we need each other.

The gift that God gave us from the start is the gift of one another. We have a need to be seen for who we are, relationships and community are at the core of who we are. We need each other. And the only remedy to loneliness is connection.

It's part of why I do enjoy attending the Annual Conference. It is so encouraging to touch base and renew the bonds with my pastor friends. To remember, we have a shared dream and passion and sense of purpose in serving God.

While relationships of mutual concern and shared purpose are not always romantic, sometimes they are. Sharon shared this delightful story.

I once attended a breakfast gala honoring an elderly couple for their lifetime commitment to racial and economic justice. Their children, now grown, explain the key to their parents' marriage: Thursdays.

Their parents were present, loving and supportive throughout their childhood, but if the kids had a school play or a soccer game on a Thursday, they knew not to expect their folks to be there.

Because Thursdays was date night. Or in their family, a "getting arrested night". Their parents would be out protesting some unjust war or unlawful detention, and invariably they'd end the night in jail, together.

It may not surprise you, it shouldn't surprise you, that the data shows that people who regularly participate in faith communities are likely to live years longer than those who do not.

People connected to church are less lonely, more motivated, more hopeful, and more fulfilled.

Whatever that married couple has, who sometimes get arrested on Thursday evenings, their shared sense of purpose and caring for each other; I want to be rooted in a faith community that has those kinds of commitments to one another.

That we would see every Sunday, every service, every activity as an opportunity for a deepening of connectivity and investing in one another.

Even as we are, as Susan writes, **"...complicated and multifaceted and wounded and beautiful, each one of us is essential to the greater whole."**

For that kind of community that spiritually anchors and roots us in regular rhythms of prayer, worship, service, and learning and reflecting.

That we would deepen and invest in celebrating and recognizing the power of people of goodwill working to help heal our church home and our broader community.

There are no easy answers. Perhaps this hope for a better experience here is a type of madness, a different kind of plague all its own?

It means to speak honestly and openly about disconnectedness and loneliness and depression and anxiety and addiction, just as we would about cancer and heart disease.

We have to be a safe place to talk about dark days, when we feel most vulnerable and talk about fragile dreams for a better future.

Darkness comes for everyone.

The question is not whether darkness will fall. The question is whether someone will be there when it does.

From the beginning God answered human loneliness with presence. Adam received Eve. Moses received helpers. Israel received a people. The church received one another. And in Jesus, God came near.

So, if you are walking through darkness today, please hold on. Hold on to God. Hold on to your church family. And church, hold on to one another. Amen.

Time of Reflection:

1. Who has helped you hold on during a season of darkness, and how might God be calling you to offer that same presence to someone else?

2. What is one practical way you can deepen connection and help combat loneliness within our church community this week?