

Loneliness or Solitude?

By Santiago Lange



The late theologian Henri Nouwen wrote: “We live in a society in which loneliness has become one of the most painful human wounds. The growing competition and rivalry which pervades our lives from birth has created in us an acute awareness of our isolation. This awareness has in turn left many with a heightened anxiety and an intense search for the experience of unity and community. It has led people to ask anew how love and friendship can free them from isolation and offer them a sense of intimacy and belonging.” (Source: *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society*, p. 83)

Loneliness is universal. It’s part of the human condition. We feel sometimes that no one truly understands us, that no one really knows us. We feel that we don’t really belong. We aren’t special to anyone. There is no one we can really talk to. It’s the sense of being forgotten, overlooked, excluded, and empty, of missing out. It’s the fear that no one really cares that we exist. We have all felt lonely at different times. Loneliness touches deep within, for the fear of being alone is a fundamental human fear.

It’s not the number of people around us that determines our loneliness; it’s our relationship to them. Can someone be wealthy and lonely? Can you be famous and lonely? Elvis Presley sang in his song – Heartbreak Hotel, “I’m so lonely, I’m so lonely, I’m so lonely, I could die.” Can someone be beautiful or handsome and lonely? Ask the movie stars whose lives were destroyed by alcohol and drugs. Can someone be married and lonely? Ask the people who marry because of loneliness and then get divorced for the same reason.

Professional counselor Dr. Suzanne Degges-White mentions three kinds of loneliness: transient, situational and chronic. As elsewhere explained transient loneliness is a sudden passing feeling; it lasts a few minutes to a day or so. Situational loneliness is a common reaction to transitions and separations, a divorce, a death in the family, the loss of a loved one, an argument or fight with a friend, a serious and debilitating illness, moving to a new location, changing jobs or losing a job, retirement, or children leaving home for college. Effects can usually last up to a year. Chronic loneliness refers to people who feel lonely for two or more years at a time, when no traumatic event has taken place.

Everyone experiences loneliness at times, even people of religious faith. Psalm 137: 1-6 is the melancholy song about being strangers in a strange land; the Jews had been taken captive and transported to Babylon; they longed for their beloved home, Jerusalem.

In I Kings 19:1-10, we find the prophet Elijah fleeing for his life from Ahab, the king of Israel. Elijah is alone, wandering across the vast, inhospitable, barren Sinai desert. Elijah feels that God has deserted him. And yet, only days before, in a contest with the prophets of Ba’al, Elijah had witnessed an awesome display of God’s power. But that was all in the past. Now Elijah

was running for his life and he ends up hiding in a cave. He sensed God's presence and said: "I have been very zealous for the lord, I alone am left and they are seeking my life, to take it away." God told Elijah to go out and stand on the mountain: "And there was a great wind, but the Lord was not in the wind, and there was a great earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake, and then a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire, and then there was silence, and the still small voice of God spoke to Elijah in the silence". Yes, even as isolated as Elijah was, hiding in a cave in the wilderness, God was there with him.

There are healthy ways and self-defeating ways of dealing with loneliness. Becoming a workaholic, going on spending sprees, turning to alcohol or drugs, or sitting around, doing nothing can become destructive ways.

What are some positive and constructive ways to overcome loneliness?

FIRST, know this, we have the capacity to enjoy being alone; treasure it, nurture it; it's a gift from God. Two words speak to our being alone. Loneliness, which has a negative connotation, expresses the pain of being alone. Solitude expresses the joy and glory of being alone. We can live alone or spend a lot of time alone and not feel lonely.

Jesus at times went off by himself in the hills of Galilee to be alone and pray in the presence of His Heavenly Father. In those moments He found spiritual renewal and a renewed vision for His mission. I know of people who like to go hiking and camping alone in the mountains, where they find renewal and strength; they recharge their batteries by being alone.

God has created us with this inner tension, with the need for relationships and fellowship and the need to be alone; with the desire for companionship and the desire for solitude.

Henry David Thoreau, author of Walden Pond, wrote: "I never found the companion that was so companionable, as solitude." (Source: Henry David Thoreau [1995]. Walden, Or, Life in the Woods, p. 88). The joy, and tranquility and solemnity of being by yourself; solitude is a precious and glorious blessing given to you by God.

SECOND, we need to take responsibility for our loneliness. Ask yourself; is my loneliness my own doing? We sometimes bring loneliness on ourselves. We shut the door on others. We cut ourselves off from family, colleagues and friends. Are we an island entirely surrounded by yourself? God brings people into our lives, are we open to them?

THIRD, recognize God's presence and call in our loneliness. Ask God to help us use our time wisely. Don't allow loneliness to paralyze us into doing nothing. God speaks to us in our loneliness, listen to what God is saying. Henri Nouwen in writes: "The more I think about loneliness, the more I think that the wound of loneliness is like the Grand Canyon, a deep incision in the surface of our existence, which has become an inexhaustible source of beauty and self-understanding." (Source: The Wounded Healer, p. 84).

God was present with Elijah in the cave. God spoke to Elijah in his loneliness. God said: "What are you doing here? Go out and stand on the mountain." Later, God told Elijah to return to Damascus and to resume his role as a prophet of God.

Loneliness can be a perfect opportunity for us to hear the voice of God. Don't let it be a missed opportunity. Listen, pray, read Scripture. God can use our loneliness to stir things up. Loneliness can be a window for God to get our attention and help us gain new insights and self-understanding. God may be coaxing us to be more sensitive, more empathetic, to the hurts and needs of others. God may be saying we need counseling for the grief we are going through, grief from a broken relationship, from an emotional wound that is draining our energy.

God may be calling you into service, into helping others in need and working with others. Get off the sidelines and get into the front-lines. Instead of focusing inward, focus outward on other people. Use your time and talents. There are needs and opportunities in the church and in the community, so get involved. Every day contains an opportunity to help another. Focusing upon the needs of others, and not only ourselves, diminishes our own loneliness.

FOURTH, God has called us into His family of faith, the church; celebrate the gift of Christian community. As Christians, we are members of a faith community. The church, the body of Christ, as imperfect as it is, as human as it is, is that Spirit-filled community in which Christ has invited us to be a part of.

Christ says: "Don't stay on the periphery, don't remain an objective observer, but reach out to one another, get involved, take some initiative. Get to know our Christian brothers and sisters: worship together, serve together, praise together, learn together, pray together, eat together, witness together, fellowship together, laugh and cry together".

Jesus our Lord understands our loneliness. Let him help us to conquer our loneliness as we: grow to appreciate our solitude, take responsibility for our loneliness, listen for God's call, and celebrate the gift of Christian fellowship. □