

JESUS UNDERSTOOD LONELINESS FIRSTHAND

If you left your home today, you undoubtedly saw some lonely people, whether you perceived it or not. If you stayed home, you may have, too. Maybe you are one of them yourself. As the Beatles sang almost 50 years ago, with mournful wonder, "All the lonely people, where do they all come from?"

The two characters in that song, Eleanor Rigby and Father McKenzie, were lonely in spite of their presence in church -- a tragedy. But yes, there are likely some lonely people in our pews and pulpits, "wearing the face that they keep in the jar by the door", like Eleanor. We can relieve their loneliness if we will but take the time to look, see, listen, and respond. That alone will extend much-needed connection.

This is the same way to care for all the lonely people who populate our day, whether friend or stranger. It is imperative that we see their plight, and act, in order to combat what former Surgeon General Vivek Murthy termed the "epidemic of loneliness" in our digital age. He coined that term in 2017, when one in five people surveyed reported that they always or often felt lonely. And that was before the pandemic heightened loneliness for everyone.

Loneliness is not the same as being alone; rather, it is the gap between the level of connectedness you want and the level you have.

Neurologists have established that loneliness triggers the hormonal "fight or flight" response, cuing our heart rate, blood pressure and blood sugar levels to rise, and our system to produce more anti-inflammatory cells and fewer antibodies.

The toll loneliness takes on our physical health has been compared to the adverse effect of smoking 15 cigarettes a day. One writer for the *New York Times* explained it this way: "The human brain, having evolved to seek safety in numbers, registers loneliness as a threat." Actually, our wise and loving Creator designed us for companionship all along, declaring from the very beginning, "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Genesis 2:18).

Besides creating a female companion for Adam, God enveloped them in loving community with Himself. But when they defied Him, that perfect community was lethally compromised. Loneliness, echoing that profound loss of intimacy with God through sin, has been with us ever since. But it will not be that way forever.

Tomorrow -- Good Friday -- we commemorate the day Jesus Christ died on the cross, taking the overwhelming weight of the sins of the whole world upon Himself. Besides the horrific physical suffering Jesus endured that day, He bore unspeakable loneliness as well.

His closest disciples had failed to watch and pray with Him in the Garden of Gethsemane the previous night. They all abandoned Him when He was arrested, tried, tortured, and sentenced to death. And as the fully human Son of God hung on the cross, He experienced not only physical suffering beyond compare, but also the pinnacle of loneliness: separation from God the Father, with whom He abides in oneness.

We cannot fully comprehend that mystery, nor what it must have been like for Jesus, leading Him to cry out in a loud voice, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46; Psalm 22:1). Yet because Jesus endured such profound loneliness, we need not suffer that ourselves.

Jesus' sacrifice enabled us to go directly to Him in our loneliness with a plea like King David's: "Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. The troubles of my heart are enlarged; bring me out of my distresses" (Psalm 25:16–17). Jesus also promised to be with us, *always* (Matthew 28:20). And to assuage earthly loneliness until He comes again, Jesus invited us all into his church family, where we can give and receive his love and care together, however imperfectly.

The Beatles song repeatedly asks, "All the lonely people, where do they all belong?" Good Friday gives the answer: with Jesus, in perfect community, forever.

With love in the Lord,
The Rev. Christine Maddux