

“Carried to Jesus”
(Mark 2:1-5; Jonah 2:1-10)

1/28/24
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I want to hammer a bit on an important theme this year, because I think it will help us to stay focused on what we are about as a church in the year ahead. It is the understanding that we are in covenant with each other and with God. And I want to connect it specifically to the epidemic of loneliness and isolation that is sweeping our country and many others.

But first I'd like to separate loneliness from solitude. Solitude is when you spend time alone in a way that feeds your soul. It's when you enjoy being a friend to yourself and being in an intimate relationship with God. Loneliness is different. It's when you are feeling alone and isolated in a way that feels bad. As one expert describes it, you know you are lonely when some kind of necessary relationship is missing and it hurts. You can even be in a crowd and still feel this way. There are tons of lonely people in big cities too.

Loneliness has a way of becoming like a trap that you feel unable to break out of, even a kind of paralysis. You feel that something is wrong and that you have been abandoned by the social skills you need in order to be vibrant and interesting. You seem to send off signals that you want to be left alone, as though you are wearing a sign on your back that says “Stay Away! Damaged Goods.” And experts say that you may feel singularly odd, as though you are the only one who is like this.

What studies are finding is that loneliness plays a major role in generating other illnesses and that lonely people tend to live shorter lives. Think about it this way.

Loneliness has an impact comparable to smoking, making your heart literally sick, without your even picking up a cigarette. If you have both smoked and been lonely, you may be nodding in agreement, because I can tell you that when you are lonely, your chest feels pretty much like it does when you smoke; as though there is a big hole in it; you feel deflated and sick. And the health impacts are just as real.

Part of the reason I stuck with Jonah this week is because the episode we just read, where Jonah is in the belly of the “whale” does a good job of describing my own experience of being isolated and alone, constantly doubting myself and my own value and it may resonate with you too. I felt like I was spiraling downward into the deep and the walls of my world seemed to be shrinking in on me. Listen to these lines from Jonah again and tell me if this doesn’t sound like a prayer you might have written yourself in your own loneliest moments.

³ You hurled me into the depths,
into the very heart of the seas,
and the currents swirled about me;
all your waves and breakers
swept over me.

⁴ I said, ‘I have been banished
from your sight;

⁵ The engulfing waters threatened me,^[b]
the deep surrounded me;
seaweed was wrapped around my head.

yet I will look again
toward your holy temple.’

These are the words of a person who feels deeply alone and depressed. His or her thoughts are like seaweed entangling him and threatening to drown him. And

mercifully in the last sentence a glimmer of hope is provided, as Jonah vows to look again toward God's temple. This is the kind of pain I think of, when I hear that we are facing an epidemic of loneliness.

And in my own case what pulled me out of my downward spiral was also the glimmer of hope presented to me by God's temple, in this case, it was the Heath Church and of course the icing on top was meeting Sheryl.

A Covenantal Approach

Just as the whale vomited Jonah back out into the daylight and onto dry land, I was spewed forth out of my lonely existence by the waiting arms of the church. They were not a perfect group of people, but they were a dedicated group of people, and the core that held them together was covenant. It was the covenant that binds different people together into congregations that saved me and that I believe has the power to save others, if we are aware of the saving power it gives us and if others today are humble enough to see the church for what it is and what they can help it to be.

We can understand covenant as the vows we take to not only look after ourselves, but to promote the wellbeing of "our neighbors as ourselves" in a circle that extends beyond our own interests. The vows we make are no more than words. But when those vows are fulfilled in deeds, covenant becomes a powerful instrument of grace.

In this morning's Gospel reading, we see a beautiful example of covenant being fulfilled in deeds. Several people have linked arms to carry a paralyzed man to Jesus. We sing the words of the hymn "Blest be the tie that binds" as a way to celebrate our covenantal bonds, and the Gospel shows us the hymn in action - we where several people literally bind arms to lift up the paralyzed man, so that he can receive a blessing.

Living in covenant involves the understanding that we can't do it alone. One person alone probably could not have carried the paralyzed man, because he would have been too heavy and probably floppy. It took several people working toward the same purpose to accomplish the task. They would have needed to use their combined strength to hold tight to each other in order to carry him up to the roof. And their arms held firm. In other words, their covenantal bonds held firm. (They didn't just drop him because he was too heavy or floppy).

The story also reveals that this team of helpful souls had to be creative and to think outside the box and that they were willing to do something daring in order to get this man through the crowd and into the presence of Jesus. And they did it by getting him up onto the roof, taking out the ceiling and lowering him down. (Saving the man came first, property concerns came second).

Allowing Ourselves to be Carried

There are many subtle and revealing details in this story. Another is that when the paralyzed man is brought before Jesus, Jesus says to him "Son, your sins are

forgiven.” But why a blessing for him? When you think about it, he didn’t really do anything to save himself. It was the people who noticed him and carried him who did the good work. They picked him up, carried him, dug the hole in the roof and got him to where he needed to be. So, you might expect Jesus to have addressed them first, and given them a blessing for delivering the paralyzed man into his presence. Then after that, Jesus could extend blessing and healing to the man.

I think that if we put ourselves in the place of the paralyzed man, we can see that a key point is being made; that the work that leads to our blessing and salvation is not something we have accomplished for ourselves. We like to think that our blessings are of our own making. But in fact, they were only made possible by the work of others. All the paralyzed man did was allow himself to be helped. Nothing more. And yet his sins were forgiven. And the work that got him there was all done by others.

This is also the case in the Jonah story, where the only reason Jonah is able to escape the belly of the fish is because God causes the fish to swim to shore and spit him out; which is something he has no control over. And I can testify that it has been the case in my journey.

And I think that when we are lonely, it works the same way. Without others taking the initiative to demonstrate their love for us by carrying us, and without our being humble enough to accept that we need them, we remain paralyzed in loneliness.

I think that this is an important point for us, because we were raised to be self-sufficient and independent and to view accepting help as a moral weakness. Many people who are always ready to carry others are reluctant to accept help in return, even when they feel within themselves that they are growing increasingly paralyzed and with walls closing in. We live in a society where you put a brave face on your suffering and hide it from others. And I think that this is one of the reasons why it is hard for us to recognize the toll that loneliness is taking on our communities.

But when Jesus forgives the paralyzed man, he is clearly rejecting the idea that his blessing is only for those who can demonstrate their independence and self-sufficiency by finding their way into his presence without help (as though such a thing were even possible).

By forgiving the paralyzed man, Jesus sanctifies a way of life in which we take turns being strong for each other and are humble enough to accept that we ourselves can really only come into the kingdom with the help of others. It's an inter-dependent approach to life, (not an independent, not a dependent, but an interdependent approach).

The Church

I believe that the church is positioned to carry others out of their loneliness in a way that few institutions can, in part because covenant is so foundational to who we understand ourselves to be. And, we are here every Sunday (when it is safe enough to travel). That is a critically important fact in a world where people are

going everywhere all the time and finding a stable community to be a part of can be so hard to pin down. And most importantly, no other institution takes its cues from someone with a bigger and more welcoming heart than Jesus himself.

I was reminded of the great power for healing that resides in our covenantal bonds this past week. We lost a member who is very dear to many of your hearts. As you know, his wife is currently experiencing profound grief and uncertainty; that she must feel as Jonah felt as he spiraled deeper into the ocean's depths, very much like the paralyzed man in the Gospel story. And when I spoke to her the other day, she told me that people from the church had been calling her all day, to see how she is doing. And I detected a moment or two of sunshine in her voice as she shared that with me.

It was an important reminder of who we are when we are our best selves and what we must be about as a church; that we are about covenant and about putting covenant into action; whether it be with a phone call, a postcard, a visit, a prayer, the offer of a meal; all these are ways in which we link arms to carry someone, in this case through perhaps the most traumatic week of her life.

We can be present to each other and also reach out to those around us who quietly feel that they must constantly put on a brave smile to cover the loneliness they feel inside. There is so much loneliness and isolation in this world and there is so much love that each one of us has to offer and we can do it even more powerfully in covenant!

