

You know, one clear reality of life is that we all share many characteristics, those things that are part and parcel of being human. Although I don't think we talk about it very much, one of those is the experience of loneliness, of sometimes feeling separate and somehow disconnected from other people. It kind of makes sense when we consider how we came into this world. From the moment the umbilical cord is severed, you and I and every other human being enter the world alone. Each of us is a God-created, unique, individual, one-of-a-kind person, unlike anyone who has ever lived or who is yet to be born. Yet in Genesis, God declares that it is not good for man (read "person") to be alone. That creates a kind of lifelong tension between our individuality on one hand, and our deep-seated need for connections, relationships, and bonds with other human beings on the other. This explains why loving another person is perhaps the greatest challenge in life. It is also the greatest gift life has to offer us, but only when we fully understand what that means in its fullest sense.

So, this morning I want to talk with you about the relationship between our uniqueness, our need for connection, and how the good news of the Gospel enables us to live with this tension in a healthy and lifegiving way. In today's Gospel we read about the baptism of Jesus. Why did he do that? It wasn't that he was blown away by the preaching of John the Baptist, and it was not that he needed his sins washed away. When Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan he *connected* with us and our human condition in a personal and powerful way, he *identified* with you and me. And for the rest of his life on earth he lived as we do and personally and fully experienced what it is to be a human being.

One of my favorite books is the "Wounded Healer" by the late Henry Nouwen. He said, "the Christian way of life does not take away loneliness; it protects it and cherishes it as a precious gift. When we are impatient, when we want to give up our loneliness and try to overcome the separation and incompleteness we feel too soon, we easily relate to our human world with devastating expectations. We ignore what we already know with a deep-seated, intuitive knowledge, that no love, no intimate kiss or tender embrace, no community or group, no man or woman, will ever be able to satisfy our desire to be released from our lonely condition. We keep hoping that one day we will find the man who really understands our experience, the woman who will bring peace to our restless life, the job where we can fulfill our potentials, the book that will explain everything, and the place where we can feel completely at home. Such false hopes end up in frustration and depression as we discover that nobody, and no thing, can live up to such unrealistic expectations." The bottom line is that God calls you and me to be there for each other while being fully aware and accepting that we can never do it perfectly.

Perhaps the time when we are most likely to feel alone and separate is at a time of suffering, whether it be pain, loss, disappointment, failure, or sadness. We often kind of retreat into ourselves and even seek isolation from others. This can be where sin enters the picture and makes things even worse as its power and purpose is to alienate and separate us from one another and from God, and sin is pretty good at what it does. As disciples of Jesus, we are called to try to enter that person's isolation and use our own experience of suffering to help other people find healing and health. One of the most powerful connections in life is that of shared experience, especially suffering. What a wonderful moment in life it is when we are hurting and feeling very much alone, and someone looks us in the eye, puts a hand on our shoulder, and says, "Yeah, I know, me too." Of course, that is the power in all of the Twelve Step movements, shared suffering and healing. As disciples of Jesus, you and I have promised to be there for one another in those inevitable times of pain and need, but at the same time we know that we cannot do it perfectly because we are different people. From that moment of birth, there is a gap between us no matter how close we may be to another. The Twelve Steps are built upon the recognition that, as much as we want to be there with one another, true healing comes through a relationship with a Higher Power, meaning our Creator.

In the 4th century, St. Augustine wrote that “our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” In other words, he believed that people have a God-shaped hole in their soul that only God can fill. He maintained that we only find true peace through a relationship with God. So, we have been freed to love and to be loved by each other without the threat and baggage of expecting another person to do what only God can do.

For us to expect another person to ever totally and perfectly identify with us and our situation is unrealistic and leads to frustration and unhealthy and broken relationships. Such expectations are totally unfair, unrealistic, and frankly impossible. So, as Christians, how are we to relate to one another? What does a healthy relationship look like? It is when the people involved love one another the best they can, accepting and even celebrating their uniqueness, and that God-created gap that is there no matter what.

There is in each of us a unique personal identity that is individual and not shared with others. It is at that moment of true awareness of ourselves that we truly meet God. The Gospel of Jesus Christ tells us the story of the God who completely understands us and can be with us in every second and experience of our lives, both in this life and in the next. God knows us because we are his creation. To use a personal example, one of my hobbies is woodworking and lately I have been making segmented bowls of various types of wood on my lathe. While working on this sermon, it occurred to me that no matter how much people admire and praise a particular bowl, they could not see it nor appreciate it as I did. They could not know about the various small imperfections and mistakes in it, nor the injuries I inflicted upon myself, nor love it as much as I did because they had not created it. God does understand us because he has lived as one of us. What is most unreachable in us is where God alone can touch us. When we no longer deny our loneliness and isolation, we have discovered a truth about ourselves, about life, and about God, that can transform us and give us that peace the surpasses understanding. Just as we can only be found when we realize that we are lost, so we can only experience companionship with God when we realize that we are alone.

Just think of the marriages and relationships that could deepen and thrive when the people involved do not expect to be always understood, appreciated, or even cared for by another. That is why the Christian faith is built upon the bedrock of forgiveness, not every now and then, but as a way of life. True love is never earned nor deserved, but freely given to the other as a commitment, a choice, even when we all take our turn at being pretty unlovable. When we expect another person to love us perfectly and fill that empty place within us, we will fail.

And so we come to consider the sacrament of baptism. Just as Jesus identified with us in his baptism, so each of us identifies with God when we are baptized in the name of his Son. In a little while we will be reminded that at our baptisms, we receive a brand on our forehead which says, “I belong to Jesus Christ.” During our lives you and I will hopefully love and be loved by many people, but human love will always have a few holes in it. This Jesus to whom we swear our allegiance through baptism loves us completely and perfectly, no holes, no ego issues, no inconsistencies, no dishonesty, and no conditions. It is the only love that fills the empty place of our human loneliness. And that, my dear brothers and sisters, is very Good News indeed.

Amen