

## **“Cultures of Connection”**

*A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May*

*First Parish in Wayland*

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Thursday was a bad day. An “Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day” kind of day. I woke that morning to an emotional storm of despair. Will this pandemic ever be over? Will the questions about what is and is not safe to do—for me and for First Parish—ever stop coming? How in the world do we sustain a congregation when we’re struggling with how to bring us all together? How do we welcome in new members, dream about the future, and chart a course to tomorrow when today’s problems weigh so heavily? All of this and more caught up with me. I cursed and wept. I journaled and called friends. I showed up to meetings on Zoom trying my best to moderate my intense emotions. A hard day.

Friday was better. The questions were all still there and just as fraught as ever. But something important happened on Thursday that made all the difference. I shared how I was feeling with others and they listened—my partner Bill, my colleagues, as well as the First Parish folks in those two Zoom meetings. The challenges remained, but what changed was the sense that I was not alone in facing them.

Feeling alone, disconnected from others, is *supposed* to feel bad for humans. We are built to be in relationship. In our brains, that panic feeling of being “left out in the cold” was once not merely a metaphor for social isolation, but rather reflected the very real danger of being without one’s tribe in the tundra. Vivek Murthy, M.D., in his 2020 book, *Together*, makes this point when he writes,

“Quite simply, human relationship is as essential to our well-being as food and water. Just as hunger and thirst are the body’s ways of telling us we need to eat and drink, loneliness is the natural signal that reminds us when we need to connect with other people.” (11)

And yet, how often do we talk openly about feeling lonely? When is the last time you shared your own experiences of loneliness with another? Perhaps you are not currently feeling lonely. Perhaps you have never felt lonely. But if you do feel lonely, you are not alone. Research suggests many adults feel lonely. For example, a 2018 AARP survey found that *one in three* American adults over the age of 45 are lonely. (10)

In Murthy’s time as the 19<sup>th</sup> Surgeon General of the US, he met many people and read many studies that drew his attention more deeply to loneliness as a major health issue in the US.

Loneliness, he suggests, often lies behind addiction, the opioid epidemic, as well as with rising suicide rates. This is because loneliness wears many masks and can appear as “anger, alienation, sadness, and a host of distressing emotional states.” (151) Core to the experience of loneliness is a sense of “missing the feeling of closeness, trust, and affection of genuine friends, loved ones, and community.” (8) Importantly, the sense of feeling disconnected from others found in loneliness is not identical to simply being alone. Sometimes we may feel lonely even in a crowd of people. Or sometimes we may be all alone but delight in the solitude and the pleasure of our own company.

To make loneliness even more nuanced, researchers have identified three kinds of loneliness: *intimate*, or emotional, loneliness, which is the longing for that intimate partner or close confidante; *relational*, or social, loneliness, which is the longing for friendships; and *collective* loneliness which is the hunger for that sense of communal belonging to a group with shared purpose, values, and/or interests. In other words, as people we crave different kinds of connections and while we may have a satisfying sense of connection in one way, we may be missing another kind of connection.

Sadly, the experience of feeling lonely can kick-off a cycle that leads to further withdrawal and more isolation. (10) Feeling lonely often leaves us with a sense of not being likable or desirable, of not having anything to contribute. Loneliness can both sap us of our self-esteem and kindle a sense of shame, of feeling unworthy of acceptance and belonging. (91) Alone with such powerful emotions, some turn to alcohol, drugs, work, or other distractions to numb the pain. And some, may externalize their inner pain as violence against others. This can be particularly risky for men and boys who too often are not given tools to connect with their emotions nor taught how to express them in healthier ways such as talking with others—a situation which can be a dangerous, contributing factor in break-up violence. (89-90)

How then might we intervene to decrease the loneliness, to help build cultures of connections where fewer people feel alone?

A fictional example can be found in the book *The Love Story of Missy Carmichael*. At 79, Missy lives alone and apart from her estranged daughter as well as from a son and grandson who live overseas. The book begins with Missy dragging herself on a cold day to a local park to watch a special event just so that she would have something to write about in her email to her son and grandson. When she unexpectedly faints, strangers come to her aid and assist. As the book unfolds, these strangers become friends, and then some even become close confidants. These friends also become conduits to larger groups, such as to a community of dog owners Missy discovers after her friends gift her a dog. While the book begins with Missy isolated, lonely, and

sipping a bit too much sherry, by the end of the book she has new connections in all three areas researchers note: intimate, social, and collective.

But that's fiction, right?

Here's another example. Following my divorce in my mid-20's, I returned to seminary where I had a group of caring friends. But upon graduation, we scattered, and I returned to Michigan to be near family while I applied for doctoral programs. Distanced from my seminary friends, I was a lonely single mom of a 5-year-old. So, I began attending a church where I joined a woman's group and met a woman named Sandy. Red-headed and warm-hearted, Sandy began inviting my son and me over for brunch after Sunday services. Feeling timid but also quite lonely, I dared to say yes to her invitation week after week. In time, Sandy became the dearest of friends. Buoyed by my new friendship with Sandy, I deepened my connection to the church, making other acquaintances in conversations after the service and at various events. Attending services and befriending the ministers also fueled my passion for religious questions. In other words, through the church, I found intimate, social, and collective connections that helped to not only assuage my loneliness, but also enrich my life in meaningful and lasting ways.

Today I am a minister not only because of my lifelong love of the spiritual journey, but also because of my lived experience of the transformative power of religious community. Being a part of religious community helped to give me a sense that I belonged to a group with a shared purpose. Being part of a church made me feel less lonely.

Murthy suggests that the first step out of the loneliness is to acknowledge that we need connections to people like we need food and water. While some of us feel capable of making or fostering connections, those who are wary and worn down by loneliness often struggle to do so. To help make it a bit easier, Murthy suggests that we need cultures of connection that encourage us to speak authentically about our experiences—both good and bad. Such authenticity helps to feel more connected to others, less lonely in our own struggles. (At its best, I believe our ritual of Joys and Sorrows can be this.)

Murthy also suggests service as an important path out of loneliness. When we volunteer and give of ourselves, we begin to see that, yes, we do have something *to* give. Receiving gratitude from others can further reinforce our sense of being of use, of being of worth to others. For example, in *The Love Story of Missy Charmicael*, Missy's dog became part of her life because her friend asked her to care for it when the owner's life fell into turmoil. Taking the dog began as an act of service to another.

But serving on its own is not enough, suggests Murthy. The service also needs to feel meaningful by being linked to a larger purpose or group that we value. I thought of this after receiving an email from Jean that all the postcards she had offered for a “Reclaim Our Vote” effort had already been claimed. Many of us are willing to serve to defend democracy!

And this brings me back to my Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Thursday. My biggest despair on that day was uncertainty about how to sustain our congregation as a place of service, larger purpose, and authentic community. How do we continue to meaningfully live out our mission, our *purpose* as a community within *this* convoluted context of 2021—a context where I suspect loneliness is even higher? In my darkest moments, I wonder . . . is there still a point to all of this?

Yeah, probably not what you expected your minister to say. And yet, you may not be aware that UU ministers are leaving the ministry in high numbers—either permanently or taking leaves for their mental health. And so, I wonder, am I next? Why try so hard to figure out covid safety protocols, tech set-ups, and multiplatform services and programs? Does it still matter?!?

I think it does. I say that not only because I know many of your stories, but also because of mine. We need places we can walk into and chance finding a new friend, or at least acquaintances we recognize and who recognize us. We need places where we can feel connected to something that matters to us and to people who agree on that same purpose. We need places where we can serve. And we need places where we can find help when we need it.

Today, I am asking for your help. The future of this place depends on all of us. Yes, it’s hard. Yes, it’s complicated to gather in groups and we may sometimes differ on what it means to do so safely. And still, we need to connect with other people. So, I am asking for your help to figure out how we can do this. How can we sustain a culture of connection during our ongoing pandemic? How can we create paths of connection for those among us who are feeling lonely—and based on statistics as well as what I hear there are lonely people among us. I don’t have clear answers on *how* to do this only a strong sense that we need to. Will you help?

When I had a hard day, it helped to talk with others. It helped to hear others say how they felt the same sometimes. The challenges remained, but what changed was the sense that I was not alone in facing them. Let us help one another. Let us listen and let us speak up authentically when we are hurting. Let us together figure out how to nurture a culture of connections that just might be a refuge for us all, especially for the lonely among us.

So may it be. Amen.