

March 31, 2019

Nutana Park Mennonite Church

Good Morning,

We are now mid-way through our series on 'fear,' and today we turn to fear of being alone. So of course our lectionary texts are all about God's constant love. I was reminded of the words of Marianne Williamson in her book 'A Return to Love' **"Love is what we were born with, Fear is what we have learned here."** In what can feel like the doom and gloom of the lenten season, the scriptures break in with stories of how love can slip in and chip away at the fear and isolation that many of us have learned to pick up through our experiences here on earth.

I feel a little out of my depth speaking on fear of being alone, as I am someone who has grown up surrounded by community. If I feel lonely I usually blame it on myself, that I have done something to isolate myself or haven't reached out enough. It isn't something that I should bother other people with, or that I have the right to talk about. But when sitting with these texts, I realized that loneliness comes in many forms, and is always painful, and it isn't something to be dismissed. I recognized that God reaches out to us, no matter why we are the way we are.

Williamson sums this up well saying also **"you'd think we'd have some compassion for ourselves, but we don't. We're just disgusted with ourselves, because we think we should be better by now."** We think that when our loneliness is a result of our actions, we are alone to fix it, to be better before we can be loved. But our scriptures today aren't talking about people who have noble journeys of isolation like the prophets or Jesus on the cross. They are talking about people who dug their own holes, and who found love despite themselves.

Our scripture texts today give us three different images of isolation: our Psalm is titled a teaching poem and is brought from David's experience following his abuse towards Bathsheba and his murder of Uriah. He has broken his relationship with God, and is experiencing isolation because he misused his power to poison relationships in his life. And after all of this David lifts up Psalm 32, filled with the joy he feels at being welcomed once more by God's love.

In our gospel text we hear of two brothers who articulate where they have perceived their isolation from their father. And how both are met with love, and always met with love.

And finally in Corinthians we see Paul reaching out to the community of Corinth trying to restore a relationship that has been frayed and diminished with distance. And telling us what our next steps are when facing this loneliness.

In our lonely world we are hard on others just as we are hard on ourselves. The same way *we* must earn love, so others must be somewhat worthy of love, especially those that have it easy. And so the same narrative that causes self-isolation begins to divide us up as well, into good and bad, into loved and other. Christina Cleveland writes in her book 'Disunity in Christ' about the dividing forces that keep us apart, that prevent us from connecting to those who are different from us, the people that haven't earned our stamp of approval. She points out how this exclusion is usually done out of a fear that loving *them* will make us less worthy of love. That simply by being in relationship with *those people* our own worth will be diminished. Cutting our community into pieces.

She opens her book with a relatable example of this instinct to disassociate:

*** excerpt from book pg.11***

On the same note she references a conversation she had with a colleague when he realized she identified as a Christian “**But you shouldn’t associate with all those ridiculous people who call themselves christian - it makes you look bad.**” And as silly as this comment may feel I have found the same thought running through my own head. When a friend confides in me about the abuse she suffered at the hands of the church, or when I see a headline with horrific acts done in the name of my faith tradition, or if I open a history book. I’m not one of *those* Christians, that’s not my group, those are different christians - the wrong kind of christians.

Just like the prodigal son is the wrong kind of son. The one that chose to cut ties with the family for his own benefit. And yet somehow, he is in the party and here is the older son on the outside of the community gathering. The one that has lived his life by the letter and then is left asking why he still feels like he is on the outside of the party. Pay attention to the conversation starting in verse 29, it gets right into the the rights and wrongs, the report card of tasks.

I’ve checked all the boxes, why am I left with no recognition?

This guy?? He is the one that gets into the community?

The one who spent all his wealth on his own enjoyment and took advantage of women who had to resort to selling their bodies to survive?

And then look at verse 31, how the dad responds “**my child.**” The first thing that the dad puts forward is the relationship,

You are my child, you have always been a part of this community.

There is no need for you to be lonely, on the outside.

You are the one that left the celebration,

there is no wall keeping you out.

The dad doesn’t chastise him or shame him, he just reaches out

I love you too, there is enough love here.

Come be in relationship with me, with your brother,

don’t stay here alone.

Both brothers are mirrors for the moments in our lives when we think we can make it on our own, and sometimes the result is outwardly devastating like the younger brother, and sometimes our outward life is fine, we might even be proud of our check list of good deeds but we still find ourselves lonely, separate by choice as to not risk losing the love we think that we have earned.

The reason I spoke so harshly of David earlier is because I know I am David. Not the same offences, but offence enough to be undeserving of the love, guidance and patience that is lavished on David in the psalm. It's a reminder that nothing I did earned me love, none of my actions caused God's embrace. It was all despite me. Just like in the children's story when I was two and none of my actions should have earned me my grandmothers showering of affection.

David shouts out that this is why everybody should pray to you, because they'll find you. Not because it's the right thing to do or how 'good people' act, but because they get to experience this love. Because they don't have to be alone, and they don't have to earn the relationship. We will never be good enough for God, that's not how the world is set up. We just are God's, we just are love. That's what we get to start with, we can live out our lives knowing 'I'm loved, so now what.'

Our text from 2 Corinthians talks about how God acts to shape a new creation out of the chaos of alienation and estrangement. How by being loved by God, being accepted without first needing to be perfect or good enough, we are able to fully participate in love. We are told that we are absolutely invited to the celebration, and it turns out the party is starting with eradicating loneliness and isolation. It means going up to other people and starting with "I love you, so now what?" Entering first with relationship, accepting that we are all on the same team and the work of reconciliation is going to be sorting out all the stuff with all the people that made us want to stay on the outskirts of this party.

And when reading this text remember, this is not a high, utopian call Paul is making. He is going into a community of people who are doing things that absolutely put them in the category of “wrong christian” and who at this point would turn to Paul and point out why *he* is the ‘wrong kind of christian’ thank you very much. And Paul says to *them*, I love you and God loves me and we have a lot to figure out, but we’re all at the same party so here we go. The encoded message is that they need to be reconciled to Paul. This is deeply personal.

“Love is not neutral. It takes a stand, it is a commitment to the attainment of the conditions of peace for everyone involved in the situation.”[Marianne Williamson] Forgiveness in these stories is not a get out of jail free card, it’s a moment where the devastation of the choices of these people is very real. And instead of God turning away, God remains and continues to help weave the world back together, with the very people who are tearing it apart. Because they are worth keeping, despite their mistakes. Because we are worth keeping, despite our darkness. Because we are loved. This is what love looks like, and it continues to guide and nudge, and nourish us despite our blundering, harmful, mistakes.

Loneliness is real and ever present in our society, but hope for the re-creation is born from participating in the solution. It’s by starting with “I am loved,” and then looking out and continuing to commit to “and you too are loved”. That’s how we live into faith in love, trusting we will never be alone.