

## Aloneness and Community: Reflections on Being Vulnerable and Building Community

Our lectionary text from Isaiah this week packs a lot into 7 verses:

- We have a kin-redeemer or “the goel” - someone to stand for us when we are in need. Think of the book of Ruth.
- We have been summoned by name.
- God will be with us through the catastrophes of life.
- We are precious.
- The exiled Jewish people will be gathered from the East, West, North, and South.
- On the harder to understand side is reference that others must pay the price or be exchanged for the exiles. I understand from reading some interpretive texts, that historically this passage was used to justify African slave trade. Other authors note that it is referencing various lands in turmoil as being so focused on mutual destruction that it allows the Exiles to escape. Either way, there are some grim aspects to this passage, and one which we would want to interpret with the newer understandings of common humanity, power, racism, and colonialism, lest we get too wrapped up in our specialness. I’ll leave you to ponder some of those tricky parts, as we move forward to the gathered people.

What called to me from this text was the notion of people being gathered - from diverse areas - North, South, East, West. These folks with their varied experiences of being exiled - different levels of acculturation, experiences of trauma, poverty, enslavement, as well as some who might have won favour or power in their places of exile - are to be called together again in community. Well. I wonder how that fared? Perhaps like some family Christmas gatherings - hugs, bickering, warmth, snide comments, belly laughs, and strategic withdrawals!

The potential challenges of being gathered together led me to think about the problems of living that bring people to see me as a psychologist - feeling alone, yearning to belong, and struggling to live in community.



Much has been written of the essential aloneness of human beings. We cannot ever know or be perfectly known by another yet we yearn to be seen. Clients will say to me, “I feel alone. I’m lonely. I want more people in my life. I want deeper connections.”

In a therapy book titled, “Undoing Aloneness” Fosha states that problems of living are “fundamentally resulting from the individual’s unwilled and unwanted aloneness in the face of overwhelming emotions.” We long for someone to share our deepest sorrows and our deepest joys. For someone to hear and see us with all our vulnerabilities. I think it is partly this yearning that is expressed and answered in vs.1 “***Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.***”

To be known is a powerful place of healing.

If we do get to the place in our lives where we have relationships with others, we then have the joy and challenge of living, working or playing with them! This is a different type of work - how do I share the tasks of daily living? How do I negotiate different opinions on politics? How do I cope with moments of feeling excluded even when I’m included? These are the struggles of living in a community.

David Whyte in *Consolations* writes: ***“Our roads of journeys of love are always lived through beautiful humiliations.”***

We have such tough moments with each other - we feel embarrassed, ashamed, delighted, joyous, angry, frustrated, tender and compassionate. The full gamut of emotions comes up when we live in community, and not all the moments are easy.

And then, just when we've found our way more or less in our community, it changes. Our beloved pastor of 17 years announces that he will “make room” for another if that's the desire of the Board. Our friends move to warmer climates or to be closer to their children. Our children move for school or work. Our friends or family become ill. A beloved one dies. We move to a new job, we move to a new home and away from our neighbourhood. These hard won communities are always in flux, and that is yet another challenge of being in the world.

So how do we proceed?

1. Know that aloneness is universal. From aloneness can come wonderful things:

David Whyte:

***“We withdraw, not to disappear but to find another ground from which to see; a solid ground from which to step, and from which to speak again, in a different way.”***

***“Loneliness is the place from which we pay real attention to voices other than our own.”***

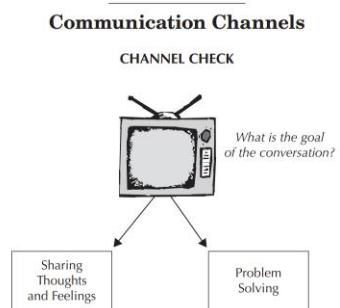
While feeling alone can be painful, there is learning and growth that can come from withdrawing from others for a period of time. If that period is thrust upon us rather than chosen, it is even more painful, but it can lead us to clarity, both in

understanding ourselves and in understanding others.

## 2. Embrace vulnerability & curiosity

In order to share deeply with others and hear them from an authentic place, we must be vulnerable. It is a great leap for some of us. We are trusting that the other person will catch us - or that we can catch ourselves if our trust is misplaced.

Hand in hand with vulnerability is curiosity. When we are curious about others and ourselves, we will ask questions, draw others out, and seek to know ourselves and others more deeply. As we are curious and listen, we grow closer to others. Too often we assume we know what the other person means or wants or that we need to problem-solve their catastrophe. In couples work, I use a *simple visual of a TV channel* - are we sharing or problem solving? We often already have the resources to problem solve - but what we need is to share.



Think about those times you've chatted with someone - and there has been a reciprocity of curiosity, vulnerability, and listening. What a weight we feel has been lifted in our aloneness.



## 3. Seeking or building community

a. We need to seek community rather than hoping it finds us. Whenever I ask my music friends to help me out on a Sunday morning, I'm essentially saying, hey,

I don't want to do this by myself. It would be more fun with you. Will you come play? And that simple act builds community between us. Interestingly, when we sing, move, act, play or drum together, research shows that we are more likely to share similar mental models, better remember each other's moves and words, and overall achieve tasks more successfully. Perhaps before my husband and I next move a couch around a corner and down a hallway, we need to sing a hymn! In *The Extended Mind*, Annie Murphy Paul writes: "Experiencing ourselves as part of a collective 'we,' rather than as a singular 'I,' changes the way we direct our focus and the way we allocate our energies." But in order to find that community, we do have to seek it, and to be vulnerable for a moment or two when we ask,



“will you play with me?”

b. Creating community opportunities is a big part of church. Creative Commons, the Christmas banquet, spring cleaning the church together are all opportunities that Deacons or others in the church have created to give opportunity for community. 60 years ago when our church was established, people had a vision for a new community and here we are - part of a 500 year Anabaptist tradition and 60 years old.



c. Communities, of course, also rely on a built environment that fosters community. Many of you are familiar with co-housing models, or communities such as Bethany Manor or St. Volodymer. These are places we've built to intentionally foster community. The Shekinah Retreat Centre is another environment - natural and built that fosters community. One built community in its nascent stages is the Hearthside Commons - our daughter Nancy and son-in-law

Parker are part of the executive working to bring it to reality. Their Website reads,



Hearthsides Commons is a multi-generational housing project located in Saskatoon's prime Varsity View neighbourhood

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**Despite having close friends and family, we all spend so much time doing the work of life alone. Our homes are built as silos around us as individuals, most of us barely know our neighbours or community, and most of us have to commute or travel to be with the people we care about. We have homes with guest bedrooms and dining rooms that sit empty, because only on special occasions do we truly gather together.**

**Imagine being able to talk and laugh with people while doing something as simple as cooking or laundry, to only need to walk outside to see your loved ones, or to have a helping hand always nearby. Imagine living somewhere that is sustainable in so many different ways- environmentally, socially, psychologically. Imagine the feeling of sitting in a room talking with people you care about- that feeling of warmth and contentment that permeates everything; that is our vision for Hearthsides Commons.**

4. Trust.

a. “Do not be afraid, for I am with you.” At this point in my life, I’m not sure of the nature of God. But I do have a sense of being part of something larger, whether that is the Creator, being part of the created, or an actual divine being. Isaiah encourages us to rest on the assurance of God’s presence in our lives. Much of what holds us back in creating community and lessening our sense of aloneness is the fear of others or doubting that we can handle the trials, pain, and nonsense that go with living in close community with others. At some level we need to trust that with the support of others, the strength within ourselves, and the ongoing presence of the sacred with and in us, that we can emotionally tolerate these vicissitudes and to anticipate and plan for how we might go on.

I wish you blessings as you seek or re-imagine your community, and blessings on us as a church in our journey.

Amen.