



FaithLink

Connecting Faith and Life

Loneliness by Jill M. Johnson



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A recent study revealed that nearly half of Americans report feeling sustained loneliness. What are the root causes of loneliness? How does being lonely affect our overall health? What can the church do to address this epidemic of loneliness?

All the Lonely People

Recently, I visited Manhattan for the first time along with my children. As we entered the city, we were immediately overwhelmed by the mass of humanity squeezed onto this small strip of land. More than 1.6 million people live and work in Manhattan, a space that occupies only 22 square miles. When you're from a city like Austin, Texas, which has less than a million people scattered over 305 square miles, that contrast is quite stark. Yet, as my daughter remarked, New York City seems like such a lonely place despite the ever-present swarm of people.

When you watch the faces in the crowds, on the subways and in the streets, you see a lot of lonely people. New Yorkers tend to keep to themselves and rarely initiate conversation. As I indulged my people-watching habit on the subway, I began to wonder how many of these silent, tired beings had someone to talk to when they got home.

Of course, I understand that just because someone looks lonely, it doesn't mean they are. All kinds of introverted folk are part of deeply rooted communities and have lives full of meaningful friendships. Unfortunately, based on the research we have, a large percentage of those people on the subway probably do feel lonely. Loneliness is widespread among Americans, and more recent research continues to confirm this finding.

In fact, loneliness is growing and has reached epidemic levels. An article on the Business Insider website examines the findings of a survey of 20,000 Americans conducted earlier this year by the global health company Cigna and released in May. Not only did the research find

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that more of us are lonely, but it also found that the negative effects of loneliness on our physical and mental health are startling. Loneliness is a public health threat on the same level as obesity and is nearly as bad as smoking.

REFLECT:

- What comes to mind if you think about loneliness?
- What does a lonely person look like to you?
- How do you react to the last statement in this section?

Specific Findings

Cigna’s news release on its national study of loneliness states that almost half of Americans report always or sometimes feeling alone or left out. Over a quarter feel that they rarely or never have someone who really understands them. Over 40 percent of Americans feel they don’t have meaningful relationships. The same amount report feeling isolated from others. Living alone increases the chances someone will report feeling lonely, but only slightly. Single parents, even if they live with their kids, are more likely to report feelings of loneliness.

According to Cigna, only about half of Americans have meaningful in-person interactions on a daily basis. Emerging adults (ages 18–22 and sometimes referred to as Generation Z) are the loneliest generation and claim to be in worse health than older adults. Other studies have found a strong correlation between mental health and social media use, but Cigna’s study found that social media use alone isn’t a predictor of loneliness.

The study used the UCLA Loneliness Scale, a series of 20 questions that measure one’s subjective feelings of loneliness, as well as feelings of social isolation. Examples of statements include the following: There is no one I can turn to; I do not feel alone; I feel part of a group of friends. Participants rate each item on a scale from 1 (Never) to 4 (Often). Possible loneliness scores range from 20 to 80. A score of 43 or higher qualifies as lonely. The average score on the Cigna study was 44, meaning that most Americans would be considered lonely.

Now that we’ve looked at the data, let’s consider how these terms are defined. An article titled “A Cure for Disconnection” in *Psychology Today* provides this. The term *loneliness* is subjective, but it’s most closely related to sadness due to a lack of friendships. One can feel lonely in a crowd of people. *Social isolation* is a more objective term that includes living alone and having very few social ties. While you might think the objective measure would be more useful for our analysis, a study by Angie LeRoy, a doctoral candidate at the University of Houston, found that subjective loneliness was a far bigger risk factor than social isolation because of the gap between the social relationships a person desires and the social relationships they actually have. “Feeling” lonely is what causes emotional pain, and emotional pain can cause a variety of health issues.

REFLECT:

- What are your thoughts on the findings of the Cigna study?
- If you use social media, does it help alleviate feelings of loneliness, or does it increase them?
- How do you define *loneliness*? How do you define *social isolation*?

The Role of Churches

The Cigna study found that people who find a balance in sleep, time with family, physical activity, and work report feeling less lonely. With this in mind, how can churches help those who feel lonely? If regular sleep is good, how can churches encourage rest? Do we overwork our volunteers and staff members? Do we uphold the value of Sabbath, or do we overschedule weekends with church activities? The same questions could be asked of family time. How can we create a community that comes together regularly as a body of Christ but also encourages quality time with family?

Some churches excel at encouraging exercise and healthy eating. Many churches support authentic relationships through small groups, social gatherings, and care programs. These can become places where vulnerability and honesty are regarded as sacred. Sadly, many regular churchgoers still find

church to be a lonely place. Most of our programs and worship experiences are geared toward extroverts, families, couples, and those who fit into social situations easily.

Community has always been vital to the Christian experience. Our tradition is one of breaking bread together in homes and carrying one another's burdens. Church is where we find lifelong friends who walk with us through birth to death and all the messiness in between. I've been fortunate to have many brothers and sisters in Christ whom I name not just as friends but as confidants.

Yet the mission statement of The United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, and part of being a disciple is learning to commune with God in solitude. My relationship with Christ shouldn't be dependent upon my social life or the behavior of my friends.

In his book *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, Henri J. M. Nouwen says that learning to be in solitude with God can heal the pain of loneliness and give us a compassionate heart. "The movement from loneliness to solitude is a movement by which we reach out to our innermost being to find there our great healing powers, not as a unique property to be defended but as a gift to be shared with all human beings," Nouwen teaches.

REFLECT:

- How do you respond to the quotation from Henri J. M. Nouwen?
- Does solitude with God come easy for you, or is it difficult? Share your feelings if you're comfortable.

Art and Loneliness

Without trying very hard, we can think of several songs related to loneliness: The Beatles' "Eleanor Rigby" ("All the lonely people, / Where do they all come from?"); "Only the Lonely," performed by Roy Orbison; or "Twilight," by Shawn Colvin ("Don't leave me alone in the twilight. / Twilight is the loneliest time of day."). Do a search for songs about loneliness, and you'll get hundreds of hits.

Loneliness, heartbreak, despair—these can all be a muse, an inspiration, for art. Yet art itself can be a powerful healing force for loneliness. Dr. Jeremy Nobel, founder and president of the Foundation of Art and Healing, created the website The UnLonely Project for this very purpose. The goal of this project is to raise awareness about loneliness as a pressing health problem and to offer tools and resources that promote creative expression as a way to alleviate the burden of loneliness. Users can find numerous articles on how to get involved in the creative process.

Leading artists are invited to share their advice on art as therapy. Those who have experienced healing through creativity have shared videos on the UnLonely website. For example, Marine Corps captain Jason Berner discusses the pain and loneliness that can come with military service. He struggled with his former identity as a strong warrior and initially resisted the use of art as therapy. Eventually, the creation of an artistic shield helped him reframe his new identity as a different kind of protector.

REFLECT:

- What songs or other artistic expressions come to mind that speak to loneliness?
- What are your thoughts on creative expression as a tool to overcome loneliness?
- If you've experienced a form of healing through an art project, share your experience.

Core Bible Passages

Jeremiah is sometimes referred to as the “weeping prophet.” He suffered constant rejection from those he was trying to reach and was forbidden to marry and have children. He was also commanded to refrain from social activities such as weddings. Talk about a lonely life!

Jeremiah was honest with God about his despair and pain. “Cursed be the day that I was born,” he laments in **Jeremiah 20:14**. “I have become a source of conflict and dissension in my own country. . . . Everyone curses me,” he complains in **15:10**. In **8:21-22**, he cries out, “Because my people are crushed, I am crushed; darkness and despair overwhelm me. Is there no balm in Gilead?” Unsurprisingly, the term *jeremiad* has come to mean a long, mournful complaint or a list of woes.

During his ministry, Jeremiah struggled to remember the promises of God, but God’s promises have been clear from the beginning. We were never meant to live alone, so God sent us help (**Genesis 2:18**). More than that, “The Word became flesh and made his home among us,” and our Emmanuel lives with us in grace and truth (**John 1:14**). Most importantly, Jesus gave us the gift of the Holy Spirit and promised, “I myself will be with you every day” (**Matthew 28:20**). We serve a God who continuously calls to us and initiates restored relationship. We’re never alone.

REFLECT:

- If you were to present your jeremiad to God, what would it contain?
- What other Scriptures provide comfort to you when you’re feeling lonely?
- Share, if you’re willing, a difficult time where you received assurance of God’s presence.

Clergy Loneliness

It can be hard to accept that our spiritual leaders might be lonely, tired, or depressed or constantly fighting burnout. After all, they’re called to shine the light of Christ and share the joy of the gospel. But many pastors do feel this way. Through surveys and stories collected over the past several decades, we know that many pastors are “friend-deficient” and lack deep meaningful friendships where they can be honest and vulnerable. It’s difficult for clergy to share their fears and frustrations with non-clergy friends who need their pastor to be confident and secure in his or her faith. Sharing with fellow clergy also has its landmines. If you admit your failings, you risk being considered a weak or ineffective leader by your peers.

Researchers at Duke University, Azusa Pacific University, and the University of New Mexico polled 1,500 United Methodist clergy from North Carolina and found that churches can have a profound impact on the mental health of their ministry leaders. An article on the HuffPost website by David Briggs, updated December 6, 2017, about how churchgoers matter to the mental health of pastors explores this research. Pastors who work at churches where members are supportive and encouraging and offer expressions of gratitude are much more likely to be satisfied and to have a higher quality of life. Those who feel isolated and those who aren’t paid a living wage are more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety, the research found.

REFLECT:

- How have you seen churches support the mental and spiritual health of their leaders?
- Consider one thing you can do to offer friendship or support to your clergy and church staff. What steps do you need to take in order to make that happen?

Helpful Links

- The following articles offer tips to address loneliness:
 - » “These Three Moves Will Help You Stop Feeling Lonely: Research Shows How to Feel Less Socially Isolated,” from *Psychology Today*, at <http://tiny.cc/eqd0uy>. (That’s a zero in the link.)
 - » “The Surprising Antidote to Loneliness: Achieving This Feeling Should Be the Goal, and It’s Within Your Power to Create,” from *Psychology Today*, at <http://tiny.cc/hsd0uy> (zero in the link).
 - » “How Not to Feel Lonely: 50 Science-Backed Tips Everyone Should Read,” from *Reader’s Digest*, at <http://tiny.cc/wtd0uy> (zero in the link).
 - » “A Cure for Disconnection,” from *Psychology Today*, at <http://tiny.cc/5j81uy>.
- The Clergy Health Initiative at Duke University has examples of programs in North Carolina that have helped combat isolation and support overall health at <http://tiny.cc/phm3uy>.
- Visit The UnLonely Project, launched by the Foundation for Art and Healing “in response to the growing public health concern of social isolation and loneliness,” at <https://artandhealing.org/>.
- Read the Business Insider article on Cigna’s loneliness survey at <http://tiny.cc/phj1uy>.

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Next Week in FaithLink

Connecting Faith and Life

Asylum

by Jeanne Torrence Finley

The controversy over separating children from their parents who cross the border brings up questions about the right to asylum. What is asylum? What are the current US laws and practices regarding asylum claims? What is the United Methodist stance on asylum seekers?

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Opening Prayer

Loving and Good Shepherd, we seek comfort in you because only you can provide true comfort. You constantly seek us out, longing to bring us into your fold. As we discuss loneliness today, help us to be honest about our own feelings, and encourage us to cultivate compassion toward the friendless; in the name of Christ. Amen.

Leader Helps

- Have several Bibles on hand (or encourage participants to use smartphone Bible apps) and a markerboard and markers for writing lists or responses to reflection questions.
- Open the session with the provided prayer or one of your own. Invite participants to take a moment to take a few deep breaths in and out. Spend a few moments in silence before praying.
- Remind the group that people have different perspectives and to honor these differences by treating one another with respect as you explore this topic together.
- Read or review highlights of each section of this issue. Use the *REFLECT* questions to stimulate discussion.
- If you have time, ask one participant to read aloud the parable of the lost sheep and another to read the parable of the lost coin (Luke 15:3-7 and Luke 15:8-10). Ask: What image of God do these parables paint for you? How would you feel if you were lost and someone canceled all their plans to look for you and bring you home?
- Close the session with the provided prayer or one of your own.

Teaching Alternatives

Print out the lyrics to the song “Every Grain of Sand,” by Bob Dylan. (You can find the lyrics at <https://www.bobdylan.com/songs/every-grain-sand/>.) Ask someone to read this song—which can be read as a poem—aloud. It might be helpful to read it more than once. Consider the following questions:

- Where do you see references to loneliness in this poem? What images or phrases speak to you?
- What themes do you identify?
- What does the writer mean by these lines?

Then onward in my journey I come to understand
That every hair is numbered like every grain of sand

- Read Matthew 10:29-31 aloud. How does this song connect to these verses?

Closing Prayer

Lord, when we don’t know what to do and all we can muster is a cry out to you in our pain, give us hope. When we feel like we can’t go on, remind us of your presence. When feelings of loneliness overwhelm us, let us know that you are there. Even though the world seems full of pain, sadness, and death, we know you are the God of life and the God of resurrection. Shape us into the people we were created to be, and fill us with your love and grace. Amen.