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Saint Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

Transforming Loneliness

Hebrews 11:29—12:2

By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Can a person be a Christian and not go to church? There are, after all, many people who say they are Christian but who attend church only sporadically; 30% of Americans—and 24% of mainline Protestants—report attending religious services “sporadically or never.” I remember once, in high school, overhearing a conversation between two friends of mine, one who was the only member of her family to attend church, and she was there nearly every week, and one whose family generally only attended on Christmas, maybe Easter. And it came up in conversation that they “attended” the same church, a conversation that came to a rather abrupt end when the one who attended only rarely said, “Oh! I had no idea you went to *my* church.”

Can a person be a Christian apart from the Christian community? The purpose of the question isn't to bring up shame and guilt - I remember a sermon from my childhood

pastor about keeping the Sabbath holy, and that particular Sunday, my mom was working a 12-hour shift at the hospital. No guilt was intended there, and I'm sure there was a more robust point, but to my little ears we'd encountered a problem - was mom going to go to hell because she was working on the Sabbath? Whoops.

Behind the question, "Can you be a Christian without going to church?" is a personal one. We ask, why should I go to church? I think the trouble about the question and its assumptions is that it assumes the purpose of church - of worship and also formation and fellowship programs and mission work - it assumes that the purpose of this community is for the benefit of the individual Christian.

We believe God has formed the great cloud of witnesses for the mutual support of Christians and for the transformation of the world.

I mentioned last week that the community that received the Letter to the Hebrews was definitely one facing violent persecution and crushing exclusion from daily life in the Roman Empire. In the Roman Empire, religion, politics, and social life were intertwined, and converting away from the religion of the Empire would be to cut one's self off from access to power and existing support systems. No wonder people among those receiving this letter were falling away, returning to old ways of living. I can imagine that it was an incredibly lonely time to be a Christian and an incredibly lonely time to be the Church. I am sure there were people who thought they could simply be Christian in secret. And I'm sure those who simply could not grieved the loss of a shrinking community.

It makes me think of some of the churches I've pastored in the past; churches whose leaders were trying to run with perseverance that race before them. Their communities - not just their churches, but their towns, villages, counties, were dwindling as people left the uncertainties of agriculture, the monotony of manufacturing for something else. It was a difficult place and time to be the church.

But I don't think that is unique to the rural church. The truth is that it is hard to be the church everywhere at least in part because it is hard to *be* anywhere—it is hard to exist at all. It isn't just that rural places are becoming lonelier, but that we are all becoming lonelier. Fewer people talk to their neighbors. Making friends is hard. In a study of the American people conducted over two decades called the General Social Survey, "the number of the people [who said] they had no one with whom they could discuss important matter nearly tripled."

On the way into worship this morning, I heard about the work of philosopher Donna Haraway. Haraway is American Professor Emerita in the History of Consciousness Department and Feminist Studies Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Haraway makes an interesting argument about the geological age in which we find ourselves. Scientists call it the Anthropocene, marked by the irreversible influence of humans on the environment. Haraway argues instead for the name "Chthulucene," marked by the fact that humans and non-humans are refugees with no home. We are lonely.

But we are “surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,” Beloved. God has formed the capital-c Church for the purpose of transforming us and our world into something that better resembles the kin-dom of God. Haraway argues that lives lived well in the Chthulucene are marked by making kin among refugees and making a home together.

Here, in this place, for a few moments on a Sunday morning, we make a home together, often among unlikely kin. Here, in shared moments of ritual and grace, the great chasms that form among us as people and the great chasms that separate us from God and God’s life into the ages, become thin. A morsel of bread and a sip of wine become a monumental feast of unity shared among all who gather and shared with the great cloud of faithful witnesses of all times and places. It is a deep and abiding mystery, when we take it into ourselves. It is fuel for transformation and redemption. It is the means by which, together, we divide through the waters of meaninglessness, like the Israelites saw the Red Sea parted. It is the means by which, together, we call for walls to be brought down, like the tumbling stones of the Jericho fortress. It is the way, together, we test the call of God, like Gideon and his fleece. And how we call one another to account for our sins, as Samuel did to his mentor Eli, and accept the kind of forgiveness that is inspired by God alone, like David.

In this place, our hour or so together on Sunday, the place where we share and celebrate God’s grace with all people becomes the fuel to live God’s grace every other moment of the week. That’s why we are partnering with Rose House LuMin to offer a new small group for graduate students and early career folks. We know that some people start here to look for connections. We’ve been approached by IU Health Bloomington Hospital to be part of its new Congregational Care Network to work with people who tell the hospital chaplains that one of the biggest barriers to healing is that they’re lonely. It is why we have spiritual growth groups. It is why, even in a pandemic, we gathered online. It is the work the undergirds our sponsorship of refugees families. Our new prayer wall, too, is meant to be an invitation to engage our community—to see in Monroe County and the places our members lives and work to see the already and not yet - that the places where God is working to transform and redeem the world are the very places we call home.

Now, I’m not saying this community called the church is a miracle drug that pulls us out of loneliness. It isn’t a salve that can soothe every problem. Even within the church is division, separation, and loneliness. But, Beloved, I am saying that the church can be a part of the *transformation* of loneliness; part of the *redemption* of the times in our lives which seem unredeemable; part of the change that makes our world look more and more like the kin-dom of God.

This morning, I want to tell you about Loren. On Day One of my internship, Loren strolled into my office and said, “Come on, I think you need to see a thing.” Which sounded very exciting, and ended up being a meeting with an insurance salesperson about the congregation’s upcoming policy renewal. Riveting. For a good long while, I worked hard not to duck when Loren came around with something else he thought I needed to learn. In over a decade of ministry, though, I don’t think a day goes by that I don’t use at least one thing Loren taught me. He was pushing 90 with just some fine

white fuzz left on his head; he couldn't have been much taller than me. He had a beautiful garden on run down cul-de-sac in Gary. He taught me how to grow asparagus, which was really interesting, not just because asparagus are fascinating plants, but because by that time Loren had had a stroke and everything he taught had to be mimed. He had aphasia, everything he said came out garbled. The first time I went to visit him at home, bringing along my little communion kit and a cheery, naive smile, we both dissolved into tears when he couldn't say the Lord's Prayer. At all. Where was "thy kingdom come, thy will be done in all this?" And he was already so lonely, unable to leave the house until he was stronger.

But then, this is what Loren did. He printed himself a big ole copy of that prayer and that was his speech therapy work. Day after day, he practiced until he could pray it. It became his connection to a community he longed to be a part of. One day I came back with communion and he basically dragged me in the door and recited it for me. I have never, ever and likely never will hear a more sincere prayer than that, except, maybe the day he returned to church and said it, grinning, among us.

"Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

Amen

Notes:

GenSoc survey information is from "Social Isolation in America: Changes in Core Discussion Networks over Two Decades" in the American Sociological Review, 2006
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/30038995>

I encountered Haraway's work in the book *How to Do Nothing* by Jenny Odell.