

12 September 2021

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

A recent article in *The New York Times* drew attention to an epidemic that has been quietly feeding on the Covid pandemic. Covid didn't cause it. It already existed. But social distancing, barriers to travel, and restrictions on gatherings have been opportune for its flourishing. And it *is* flourishing. It's an epidemic of isolation and loneliness.

They're not the same. We can be isolated but not be lonely. And we can be lonely but not be isolated. "You can have plenty of social connections, even close connections, and still feel lonely," the article says.

Though they're not the same, isolation and loneliness produce a common malaise. Clinicians focus on three questions: "How often do you feel that you lack companionship? How often do you feel left out? How often do you feel there's no one you could call upon for help?"

The phrase 'how often' suggests there might be a magic number, a clinical cut off point. Maybe there is. And the word 'feel' acknowledges that people's experience of this malaise will be filtered by their subjectivity. They'll vary in how they report it. But I think there's something *objective* at play here, a real condition we can identify.

We've all felt devastating loneliness, even in the middle of a crowd. Sometimes, the crowd makes it worse. On the other hand, some of us can live like hermits, isolated from society, or with minimal human contact, yet never feel lonely at all. Strange.

Even if the loneliness and isolation don't perfectly coincide, they're 'fellow travellers', and there's bound to be a large overlap. It turns out that the hermit is just as prone to poorer mental and physical health as those who are afflicted by loneliness.

So, beneath the psychological pain we feel as loneliness, we must also have a *physical* hunger for social contact built right into our animal nature. One can feel the pain of loneliness but not the hunger of isolation, or the hunger isolation but not the pain of loneliness. Or both. Either way, the malaise is real.

Maybe this is why Zoom doesn't 'cut it' – one reason, anyway (I have a list). Zoom is *not* social contact, not really, not physically. Zoom accentuates our isolation. Zoom is the crowd that makes you feel more lonely.

I wonder if there's room in our life at Elmwood for more human contact, not necessarily amongst ourselves, and not in the pursuit of more religious activities, but simply in the old-fashioned way of neighbourly contact and the forging of friendships.

I haven't held a Confirmation Class for young people for many years. I don't know any young people who are interested, and any young people who *are* interested don't know me. But if I were holding a Confirmation Class today, I would give each young person an assignment.

I wouldn't make them memorise even more Bible verses. I'd have already tortured them with that. Neither would I make them sit an advanced exam in Church History and The Shorter Catechism. I'd have already tormented them with a basic one. Nor would I require a writing assignment in which they must explore the question, "Which is better – Luther, Calvin, or Knox?" (Hmm...no wonder I have no Confirmation Candidates.)

Instead, I'd require each one to visit someone in our neighbourhood, someone who is isolated, or lonely, or both; someone older than they are. They'd have to do this not just once, but once a week for a year.

They'd balk at this requirement. So would their parents, I suspect. Maybe I'd insist, though. We clergy have been pushovers, in some respects, and far too spineless and flaky. We've asked so *little* of people, especially young people, in the way of living the faith we preach. And they have obliged. And they have missed the joys of faith and life in the Church.

Once they'd established contact with people who are isolated and lonely, these fictional Confirmation Candidates would assist them if they needed assistance, play a game if they needed more fun, talk about the news, listen to each other's music (and explain it), pray out loud (scary!), learn about each other's families, and hear stories from each other's past (the young person have to do more listening than talking at that point). Maybe this would assuage the loneliness and isolation that young people feel. All the while, they'd be 'learning the faith' by *living* it.

"How often do you lack companionship? How often are you left out of things? How often do you have no one to call on for help?"

"I was lonely, and you befriended me." Jesus doesn't say this, exactly, in Matthew 25. But he might have.

Yours in the faith,
Andrew