

## *Alone*

United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
September 17, 2023 – Sunday Morning Worship  
2nd Sermon in the Series: *The church as ...*  
Text: Romans 14:1-12

A well-documented epidemic of loneliness is now rampant in the United States. Articles and stories in all sorts of publications including *The New York Times* have been appearing for months. A column by Nicholas Kristof in the *Times* on September 3 begins by stating the seriousness of the situation:

“Loneliness crushes the soul, but researchers are finding it does far more damage than that. It is linked to strokes, heart disease, dementia, inflammation and suicide; it breaks the heart literally as well as figuratively.”<sup>1</sup>

People have been lonely since humans have been on this earth, though. We have to wonder why this malady of the soul has become so acute now. Certainly, the recent shut-downs and isolation of the Covid years has played a significant role in this but it is surely not the only factor. And it’s not as though the solution is not pathetically obvious – be around people. Yet it is clear that more and more people – people each of us know – suffer from this loneliness and isolation so rampant here and around the world.

In this same article, Kristof reports some interesting responses nations around the world are taking as loneliness is recognized as the serious threat to health and well-being that it is. He writes, “Britain is the pioneer of these efforts having established the post of minister for loneliness in 2018.”<sup>2</sup> He goes on to note that Japan also has a minister for loneliness and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/06/opinion/loneliness-epidemic-solutions.html>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Sweden has a minister for social affairs. Other countries are calling for similar posts to be created in their nations as well, so serious is the threat to public health it poses. Still, we have to wonder how something like loneliness has grown to this point in a world more populous than it has ever been. Kristoff outlines the real danger of this situation here as he notes that this epidemic of loneliness “costs the public enormous sums in unnecessary health costs. ... One review of 148 studies concluded that social connections increase the odds of an individual’s surviving over roughly the next seven years by about 50%.”<sup>3</sup> He continues to pose the question as to why there weren’t more of what he calls “deaths of despair”<sup>4</sup> in the 1930’s United States when the Great Depression devastated the world’s economies. He posits this theory in response to his own wonderings:

“I think in part because in the 1930’s there were community institutions – churches, men’s clubs, women’s associations, bridge clubs, bowling leagues, extended families – that buffered the pain and humiliation of unemployment and economic distress, and in some cases these groups actually stepped up and became more active during times of distress.”<sup>5</sup>

Okay, I’m agreeing with him so far on this but then he loses me when he writes, “These community institutions have frayed. Now we’re on our own, and perhaps that’s why so many are also dying alone.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Dear ones, we are one of those community institutions he is so very quick to dismiss. Our little church is one of those community institutions which has “frayed.” But unlike what Kristoff implies, we are not gone. We are not useless in our potential to respond to and make a real difference in this epidemic of loneliness we see and experience all around us. The truth is that we have not left people to their own devices. It is they who have chosen to leave the church. Of course, there can be no question that some have had very good reasons for doing so – inexcusable behavior on the part of church leadership in the form of sexual, financial and interpersonal misconduct has had a huge negative impact on who is willing to walk through the doors of the church. So have the far right conservative religious ideologies around things like women’s rights and reproductive freedom, racism, climate change and the well-being of the LGBTQ community. Some churches’ stances on these issues have literally pushed people out the doors of all churches as they relegated faith and religious institutions to the dustbins of their lives. This is real, I know. But we cannot let this be the last word on the meaning and significance of faith and the unique community a church such as ours has to offer. We owe our brothers and sisters in the community outside our doors more than this. We owe God more than this. So, what do we do? How do we move forward from this place on the margins of society where we now exist?

Here’s is where we can find both hope and a little guidance from our good friend Paul in his ancient letter to the church in Rome. The portion which we read this morning is admittedly, to me at least, a little odd as he seems to be stringing together a bunch of issues that, on the surface at least, have little to do with

loneliness or even each other as he drones on in these 12 verses. As we look at the text, we must begin by reminding ourselves that Paul is writing in response to a letter he received from someone in that early Roman church. We don't know who because we don't have that letter. We only have Paul's response. And here is what he seems to be saying. First he is adamant that people coming in to the church for the first time are what he calls "weak in faith" which only makes sense since they are new to the whole church experience. People need to remember this about visitors to the church, Paul says. He also reminds the church folks that these new people did not come to church "for the purpose of quarreling over opinions." Yes. Just yes. The next few verses are a little odd because it seems to be a dispute over what folks are eating, reading as though the vegetarians are being quick to find fault with the meat-eaters in the church and vice-versa. Paul points out that, whoever these folks are in terms of diet doesn't matter at all to God. It is God who has welcomed them into the church first and foremost. Now, that is an important point for all of us to remember. It is God's own self who first invites and then welcomes the visitors to us. God knows what they need and brought them to us. That's all we need to know.

The next verses continue on in this vein about the need for folks in the church to stop being so quick to judge others in general. In verses 5 & 6, it becomes clearer that what folks are really judging each other for is what they are eating on the sabbath. Some are fasting entirely. Some are eating only vegetables and forgoing meat. And all sides of this conundrum are judging the others to be less than before God for what is, in the end, a uniquely personal decision as Paul points out. He

makes his opinion on the matter succinct: “Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord.” Make your own decision, eat or don’t, but whatever you decide, remember it is to honor the Lord, Paul explains. No one should be judging the other for what they decide in this regard.

This next part is where I see Paul addressing this whole issue of how the church – our church – should see itself in responding to this epidemic of loneliness all around us, even within our own church, even within us. He writes, “We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves ... [because] we are the Lord’s.” We do not live to ourselves and we do not die to ourselves. Paul is reminding us quite clearly that loneliness in the midst of isolation is not God’s intention for any of us. Life in a church, a religious community, a gathering of the followers of Jesus in a particular place at a particular time, is what God desires for us. If the church is fraying as a community institution and resource, this is why. The recognition of that need to gather with others struggling with the same issues in life, grounded in study, prayer and the sacraments, is what we have lost in our society. It is also what Paul is saying is vitally important to all who want to be a part of God’s plan for our world.

The thing is, though, this not judging thing is almost entirely contrary to human nature. Let’s face it, we are all quick to judge other people, even when we’re trying not to. I do. I admit it. I get irritated with people who drive 62 in the high speed lane on 95. I fume at the people who judge me for the way I look, for the opinions I hold and the way I practice my faith -- loving and accepting of all. I mean, mine is the right way to think, isn’t it?

And if I'm right, doesn't that automatically make everyone else wrong? No. It doesn't. Paul – who is doing and saying exactly what Jesus said in this regard – says we are not to judge others at all. Period, end of discussion. That is for God to do. Not us. Ever.

Yikes. That's hard to do, isn't it? Yes, it is. But still, exactly what does all this have to do with the epidemic of loneliness and how the church, our church, can and should be responding? I see a couple of important connections here for us to consider. First, we need to realize that folks coming in our doors for the first time, even if they are coming because one of you invited them – the best way for new folks to come, by the way – they are still nervous to be here. They are still afraid, on some level, for being judged by us church people. Will they do the right thing at the right time during the service and if they make a mistake what happens? These are real fears many people have when they join us on Sunday morning. Our job then is to be warm and welcoming from the moment we say hello, to let them know that worship in this church is for them to experience in their own way.

Second, we need to realize that folks already here, as well as folks visiting, are lonely too. They are perhaps lonely because they are shut-ins but more often they are lonely just because they are. No need for a label here. They are lonely because the disconnections in their lives are painfully real. One simple truth is they might not really know how to make friends. That's why a smile and a kind word from each of you to each other and everyone else here is so very important. We need to realize that the smiles and well wishes we share with each other here may be the only smiles and happy thoughts some folks experience! This

is truly a situation where small things matter, where warmth and kindness is more than just a nice thing to do. It's a lifeline to someone who may be drowning in loneliness just beyond our line of sight. These are the people Jesus is inviting us to look for, be aware of, reach out to. But, at the same time, we cannot overwhelm them with our good intentions! We can't all rush the visitors at the end of service! Heavens no! We can trust that a few of our brothers and sisters nearby to them will offer greetings on behalf of us all because we're a church together, aren't we.

And that's the whole point isn't it. We are God's people together, making our way through this journey we call life together. Sometimes that journey is incredibly difficult and painful, times when our sense of being alone is overwhelming. At other times moments of being on our own can be tonic for a soul overwhelmed by too much noise in the world. The trick for us then is to be able to discern the difference and respond as the other needs in that moment. And we can only do that, dear ones, when we invest in each other and in this community of Jesus' followers we find in our beloved church. This is truly the why of church – so that none of us needs to make this journey through life on our own. This, I believe, will be a key piece of how our church needs to see itself as we gather next week on Threshold Sunday to begin the process of planning for our church's future. How is God calling us to respond to the needs of this community in which God has placed us? The epidemic of loneliness is real and perhaps we can be a part of the solution. That is a question before us and it is a real one, among others surely. I look forward to pondering the possibilities together, with God as our partner

and guide in everything we seek to do and to become. I hope you do too. Amen.