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“Not Alone, but Lonely”

Mark 1:29-39

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Mark 1:29-39:

²⁹ As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. ³⁰ Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. ³¹ He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

³² That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed by demons. ³³ And the whole city was gathered around the door. ³⁴ And he cured many who were sick with various diseases and cast out many demons, and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

³⁵ In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed. ³⁶ And Simon and his companions hunted for him. ³⁷ When they found him, they said to him, “Everyone is searching for you.” ³⁸ He answered, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also, for that is what I came out to do.” ³⁹ And he went throughout all Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

“Not Alone, but Lonely.” I want to talk about that and I’ll begin with a couple of *reflector tape illustrations*; illustrations that reflect so brightly, you can’t miss the point.

Consider the *First Semester Freshman Blues*. I am not talking about the experience of those

- who study online



- or commute from home;
- or are those unicorns who leave for college without looking back,
 - so happy for their new adventure.

I am talking about the experience of most freshmen their first semester sleeping in a dorm rather than their bedroom which, if they're lucky, is waiting for them and hasn't been turned into a home study. Surrounded by hundreds, even thousands, of people their age, attending required classes with hundreds of students, they are *not alone*. Yet, not knowing who to connect with or how to do it, feeling like a stranger in a crowd, an imposter in a club, most have bouts of severe loneliness. Not alone, but *lonely*.

Another reflector tape example: *Social Media*. Those who spend hours a day on social media can be a part of an online community of thousands even as they isolate themselves from loved ones close by. And the way they connect with others online can make them seem more isolated still:

- pictures of meals they do not taste
 - and vacations that are not on,
- seeing friends having fun with friends and feeling left out.

And what about their 763 Facebook friends anyway?

- How many of them do they really know?
- Do they remember why some of them were friended?

I think these two reflector tape illustrations magnify a truth about the human condition. None of us are alone but, to some extent, all of us can feel lonely. I am talking about loneliness in a very specific way, not simply as an emotion. I am talking about it as a sense of isolation even when around other people. I am speaking of loneliness as feeling isolated, and that is not always a bad feeling. In fact, ...

But I'm getting ahead of myself. I'll get there. I think we should start with loneliness as something that can be a problem we try to overcome

We want to be known and understood by others, maybe even loved. Loneliness as isolation is something we often want to overcome but which we cannot finally escape because there are places in us that no one can reach or understand. Efforts to overcome that sense of isolation can lead to some bad decisions, some sacrifices of the best of who we could be.

Consider some well-known characters in the Gospels as examples of people who find themselves lonely, though they are not alone.

Consider Judas. Think of Judas at the last supper. When Jesus speaks to his disciples gathered around the table, he speaks of the meal as one of connection, not isolation. They are to take and eat. They are to share the bread as the body of Christ as they become a body of Christ in the world. They are to share the cup of what Jesus calls his blood because they are to sacrificially love others the way Jesus has sacrificially loved them. Jesus tells them to repeat this meal and



remember his words because he wants to build a forgiving, reconciling community to carry on his movement of grace in the world.

Judas is not alone. He is there at the table along with the other disciples. He has been with them almost since the day Jesus was baptized by John. But *the deal has been struck*. He is going to betray Jesus with an intimate gesture of connection- a kiss. Judas knows what he has done. *That* is his loneliness.

Countless sermons have been preached on why Judas does what he does. There is at least one reason no one can deny. He took 30 pieces of silver as payment. Looking for a material solution to a spiritual void is the classic pretext for some of the worst decisions we can make.

Now consider Pilate when Jesus stands before him in his palace. He has the power of Rome behind him. He has his wife to advise him and soldiers to protect him. And look at Jesus. He can't be a threat- all bloody and worked over by soldiers who did their job with delight. And outside is a mob calling for Jesus to be crucified. Pilate is far from being alone.

But that the mob outside is why Pilate is lonely in this moment. You see, he knows that Jesus is innocent. Pilate might feel confident at other times doing exactly what he wants, but in this moment he is like other leaders who are intimidated by the people they lead. It is a lonely moment when you can't speak your truth when the mob calls it a lie—when you can't do what is right because the mob celebrates the wrong. Pilate is a governor—but he needs to keep the mob on his side to govern.

Pilate and Judas. Those are light reflector tape illustrations of bad outcomes of isolation, aren't they?

But loneliness can be a catalyst for growth and healing too.

Consider Nicodemus? Nicodemus has his people. He has his tribe. He's a Pharisee. Pharisees are joined in the common cause of knowing and interpreting the scriptures. They are well-respected and have a powerful influence in the community as to how people are to think and live their lives. You could say it is one of the strongest peer groups of Jesus' day. Many Pharisees are devout and humble servants of God and really do help build strong and healthy communities.

However, as often happens in human communities, including religious ones, power and control issues get in the way with some of them. Unfortunately, you know what they say about bad apples. The whole bushel gets a bad reputation. The author of John's Gospel talks about "the Jews" and "the Pharisees" the way a lot of people today talk about "the church." They see the shameful behavior of some ministers and congregations and say they want nothing to do with "the church."

I think Nicodemus is part of a company of Pharisees who have been poisoned by power and control, and they see Jesus as a threat to their authority as interpreters of scripture. I don't think this because of anything John's Gospel says about the specific Pharisees Nicodemus hangs with. I think this because Nicodemus sneaks away at night to go talk to Jesus. Is he afraid to be entertaining the idea that Jesus might actually have something to say about scripture and salvation worth hearing that he knows those he hangs with will disagree with?



If so, that is the loneliness of Nicodemus. He is like Billy Elliot of the movie of the same name, a child of a working-class family sneaking away to learn how to dance ballet. Nicodemus' loneliness is that he is drawn to someone he believes his tribe rejects.

We see in John's Gospel the growth of Nicodemus as he moves from sneaking away at night to speaking up for Jesus in the light of day.

There are other examples in the Gospels where the story begins with their isolation. I'll run through a few quickly.

- There is the man possessed by demons, living among tombs in a cemetery.
 - Some would say he is not alone because so many demons keep him company.
 - But he is isolated by those demons.
- The ten lepers.
 - Some would say they are not alone because they have each other.
 - But lepers are isolated as those who are treated as the living dead.
- The Syrophenician woman whose daughter is deathly ill.
 - Some would say she is not alone because there are people all around her when she begs.
 - But she is canceled by so many because of her race and she is the one having to beg.
- The woman known for her moral failure who washes Jesus feet.
 - Some would say she is not alone because they use expressions like,
 - “You know how *they* are.”
 - “You can't help people like that.”
 - “You know their kind.”
 - She is isolated because she is now known mostly for her sins.

All of them are isolated because they have something about them- within them- that sets them apart and condemns them. Each is lonely in the rejection.

These are positive stories though. Out of their loneliness, they seek a connection with Jesus. They are compelled to be seen, heard and understood. And their physical or spiritual healing begins with Jesus' willingness to be present to them;

- to face with them their demons,
- to touch the untouchable,
- to see the person rather than the problem,
- and to find as acceptable company someone declared by all to be unacceptable.

Jesus can meet them in their loneliness because he actively seeks loneliness himself.

Not all the time. He has a life. He goes to dinner parties, he has deep conversations, he shows compassion to the suffering, he attends synagogue and makes pilgrimages to the temple.



But there are times when he embraces loneliness by saying and doing things that isolate him even when he is not alone;

- as when he upsets the crowd that adores him by saying what they do not want to hear,
- as when he upsets religious leaders when he doesn't agree with what they say God demands,
- as when he upsets his followers by telling the truth about his coming arrest.

Jesus' has the courage and clarity to isolate himself because he embraces *faithful loneliness*. His core identity doesn't come from those who follow him, who try to lead him, who adore him and want him as their king, or those who confront him and demand that he conform. His courage and clarity come from his *faithful loneliness*.

Our passage from Mark is telling us that. Yes, here at my sermon's end, I finally have gotten our passage which is at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Even though our passage comes from the first chapter of Mark, Jesus is well into experiencing being the center of a Taylor Swift-type phenomenon. Jesus is early in his career but already quite famous. The powerful influencer, John the Baptist, has proclaimed Jesus to be a greater witness to God than himself and people are coming in droves to see what he is talking about. Jesus doesn't disappoint. His teachings are fresh and astonishing. His healing of the sick, including Simon's mother-in-law, are amazing. Momentum already is building toward the mob wanting to make of him a political messiah. At the center of it all, followed by many, crowded constantly, *Jesus is not alone*.

But as tempting as it is to be who the crowd wants him to be, Jesus protects his loneliness. When the crowd presses in too much, he *chooses* to go to a "lonely place" to pray. He does it here at beginning in Mark's Gospel and does it over and over again in Mark's Gospel. His isolating himself in prayer makes a point to others and is a reminder for him.

- He has been promoted by John,
 - but he doesn't belong to John.
- He is followed by disciples,
 - but he doesn't belong to the disciples.

He doesn't belong

- to those he healed,
- or to those amazed by him.

He doesn't belong

- to those who will want to make him king,
- to those who later will want to bring him into line,
- or those who will imprison him.

He belongs to God.

His sacred loneliness comes from being grounded in who he is before God. It is choosing to be alone with God.



I know it sounds nice to say we should ground ourselves in prayer. That's what a minister is expected to say. But I bet you don't hear this from ministers very much: There are some unhealthy ways to pray. Jesus' prayer is a unique kind of prayer that calls into question how we sometimes pray,

- when our prayer is managed by how others tell us who we are and how things should be,
- those prayers when we go to God to inform God
 - who we are,
 - and how things should be;
- when we inform God
 - who should be God's enemies,
 - and who deserves
 - political,
 - spiritual
 - and material blessings.

Jesus' prayer is not that way. His prayers are about being isolated from others so as to be present with God. They are listening prayers before they are asking prayers. It is in prayer that Jesus grounds himself in the love and grace that flows from God. It is where he humbly surrenders to what it means to be God's child, to live by a moral code that calls him, on the one hand, to be a servant of others but, on the other hand, saves him from being subservient to their demands.

When Jesus emerges from prayer, he has the clarity and strength to remain true to what God wants of him when he is no longer alone; when he is back before the crowds, leading the disciples and facing those who oppose him and eventually want to destroy him.

We are all lonely sometimes. No one can reach those inner parts of you that only God can reach. I encourage you to embrace sacred loneliness. In being alone with God, become comfortable with being alone with yourself. Find strength to resist letting unhealthy Christians tell you what it means to be Christian, but also find strength to resist those who reject Christians because of unhealthy Christians tell you what you should be. Find your identity in being alone with God. That is where your clarity and strength will come while being among others as one who follows Jesus.... the one who calls for justice, shows mercy, and works for reconciliation in the world.

That will enable you to be strong and true among those who do claim to be Christians... and among those who do.

