**"Making the Connection: On Being and Belonging"**

**A Sermon for University Congregational Church**

**Sunday, October 24, 2021**

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Traditional Word:

Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. Relieve the troubles of my heart and bring me out of my distress. Consider my affliction and my trouble and forgive all my sins. –Psalms 25:16-18

The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his testimony. Whoever has accepted his testimony has certified[n] this, that God is true. He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. John 3:31-34

Contemporary Word:

"The risk of love is loss, and the price of loss is grief - But the pain of grief is only a shadow when compared with the pain of never risking love."

 --Hillary Stanton Zunin

"We need to return to an idea that was central to our founding and is at the heart of many great religious traditions: We have commitments to ourselves, but we also have vital commitments to each other, including to those who are vulnerable."

 – Havard's "Making Caring Common Project.

 "Making the Connection: On Being and Belonging"

 There's a moment now when I know when I've become disconnected from all of the electronics in my life. I receive a slight little buzz in my left wrist. No, it's not carpal tunnel. It's my smartwatch, of course, and it's telling me that I have stepped beyond the range of its Bluetooth connection. I am no longer connected to the electronic world. It doesn't usually happen here at church because I have attached this watch to the UCC wireless system, so I'm almost always connected when I am here. However, as those of you familiar with our technology issues here at UCC know, that wifi connection often fails, and I am once again alone—a non-entity—at least as far as the vast global internet is concerned.

 We're connected, you and I, in ways that our parents and grandparents never dreamed of and could possibly not even imagine. And yet, here we are, with all of this connectedness-- the internet allows me almost instantaneous communication with my brother and his family. They literally live halfway around the globe in the middle of Asia. Yet, for all of our technological connectedness, loneliness still inhabits and haunts the lives of so many of us: 3 out of 5 of us report being lonely, according to a recent survey by NPR. Well over one-half of all of us report feeling lonely. That's a disturbing and disheartening number. About half of young adults in another new Harvard study on loneliness said that no one in the past few weeks had "taken more than just a few minutes" to ask how they were doing in a way that made them feel like the person "genuinely cared."

 We not only have the scourge of the pandemic, but we have the significant disease of loneliness—and it is beyond epidemic proportions. AND we have failed to lament these overwhelming bruises to our souls. We don't lament in our culture—we bury our sadness and loneliness under a mountain of food, and shopping, and mindless entertainment. We need to lament. We need to lament COVID, our politics—so ugly and hateful—our loneliness. Sometimes we need to lament, to weep, to gnash our teeth, and rend our clothing. I know it's anathema to our congregational Spirit, but we must learn to lament. We must learn to grieve and to grieve deeply and hard and then hold each other up in our grief. These past 18 months have been spent in the belly of the whale—we've all felt like strangers in a strange land—we haven't felt connected or like we belong to anything for ages now. We should lament and then turn our hearts towards the Holy One and ask for solace. God is there to help us co-create new ways to connect and to belong in the world, but we can't move on until we lament. God hears our lamentations and pours wisdom into our hearts. As the Psalmist reminds us in Psalm 25: "Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. Relieve the troubles of my heart, and bring me out of my distress. Consider my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins."

 We will all have an opportunity next week to practice lamentation. We are holding a Service of Remembrance within next Sunday's worship service—as part of the regular service—and we ask that you bring a memento of someone you wish to remember. A photograph, or something they made: I used a mug I had bought for my dad that made its way back to me. Anything that you wish to share. Then during the service, you will have an opportunity to come forth, state the name of whom you are remembering, and we will celebrate your memory with you. This will be an opportunity for us to lament—and remember.

 While Harvard's recent project gave us some disturbing data concerning loneliness, it also developed some suggestions for battling the loneliness epidemic, ways in which we might co-create a new world with God:

 We need to provide people with the information and strategies to help them cope with loneliness, including methods that help them identify and manage the self-defeating thoughts and behaviors that fuel loneliness. We should be building not just our physical but our social infrastructure at every level of government and in our communities, including the community we call University Congregational Church. We need to begin reimagining and reweaving our social relationships in health care, schools, and many other institutions, including our churches. We MUST work to restore our commitments to each other and the common good to renew a founding promise of this country: that we have obligations to ourselves, but we also have vital obligations to each other, including to those who are most vulnerable: the poor, the aged, those who have lost hope. The lonely.

 I believe we can also turn to the Gospel message to help us find a way out of our loneliness. The writer of John's Gospel says this in the third chapter: "The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his testimony. Whoever has accepted his testimony has certified this, that God is true. He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure." Our spirits belong to and with God. At least, that's what comes through to me in this part of John's Gospel. The giving of the Spirit without measure.

 I believe we can turn again to the Hebrew Bible for wisdom regarding our loneliness. I love the ancient Hebrew philosophical teaching of Tikkun Olam that has in its modern usage come to connote social action and the pursuit of social justice—you might have heard in regards to healing the planet or other ecological issues. The phrase, Tikkun Olam, originates in classical rabbinical literature and refers to social agreements that provide extra protection to those at a disadvantage — governing, for example, fair and just conditions for writing divorce decrees and for freeing slaves. In reference to individual acts of repair, fixing our loneliness, for example, the phrase "Tikkun Olam" figures prominently in accounts of creation and its implications for that creation. Here is one version of how the world came to be, using the philosophy of Tikkun Alum:

 "God created the divine self to make room for creation. Divine light became contained in special vessels or jars, some of which were shattered and scattered. While most of the light returned to its divine source, some light attached itself to the broken shards. These shards constitute evil and are the basis for the material world; their trapped sparks of light give them power.

 According to this particular creation account, the first man, Adam, was supposed to restore the divine sparks through mystical practices, but his sin interfered, as it often does in these creation stories. As a result, good and evil remained thoroughly mixed in our created world, and human souls (previously only contained within Adam's) also became imprisoned within the shards."

 Now, this part of the account is important—listen closely: The "repair" that is needed, therefore, is two-fold: the gathering of light and of souls is to be achieved by us mere human beings through the contemplative performance of religious observance. Worship of the divine and spiritual practices: The singing of hymns, reciting prayers, the teaching of the Torah. Sound like anything we are doing here this morning? The goal of such repair, which can only be effected by humans, is to separate what is holy from the created world, thus depriving the physical world of its very existence—and causing all things to eventually return to a world before that separation from the Holy One--before human sin--thus ending history—but restoring paradise. Our souls, our sparks of the divine, trapped within us, yearn for belonging—we are filled with the desire to belong—because we are shards of glorious divine light trapped within these faulty and undependable physical bodies.

 While spending time on the internet may feel like a connection—it might give us a feeling of belonging-- it requires the physical presence of others to really let our light shine, as it were. It is in the shared communal work of this church that our shards of light, our splinters of the divine, our souls, our spirits, whatever word you wish to use, that is when we connect. And my Spirit senses in you your Spirit, and off we go. We must be present, physically present, to feel the full effect. We require that physical proximity for our hearts to connect. The internet can help—but proximity is necessary for a healthy soul. But wait—there's more!

 Mere proximity to other humans isn't enough. We need connectedness. We need to feel like we belong. But for many of us, this is a problem. We want to belong--but not too much. We don't want to become too enmeshed with some group because that's where we begin to feel vulnerable—and if our trust in communities and individuals and institutions has been damaged in the past—if we've been really hurt by a friend, or a spouse, or even a church, then we are very hesitant to put our hand anywhere near that hot stove again, right? At least not for a while—we have to heal—review what happened, and then we spend the rest of our lives having these red flags pop up—oh, I remember this feeling—this is how I felt right before and after that great betrayal. And it is this fear of being vulnerable again that keeps us from really connecting. It's both a self-protective act that our souls employ to keep us from getting hurt again (that's what it's there for)—but it then also becomes a wall. A wall around our hearts—anyone of us who has had our heart broken, or stood near a loved one and watched them die, or were betrayed by a partner at our most vulnerable moments---all of that feeling just adds another brick in that wall around our hearts. That's just one more excuse we tell ourselves about NOT belonging to some group. That's why we decide to sit at home and binge some Netflix series. That's why we opt for the way of the world—it's so much easier just to tune it all out and to follow the path of conspicuous consumption and reality TV. Yay- Kardashians!

 Sometimes I think our lives are nothing but this eternal tension of wanting to belong and then resisting belonging too much because we've been hurt before, and we're not ready to take that risk, put ourselves out there and try to belong again. That sounds an awful lot like love, doesn't it? Love can really hurt, but if we don't at least try, we never get the experience. We have to keep trying. We just have to. It's in our DNA. It's what makes us human.

 I recall my mother in her final two months of life. Hard to believe it was just this past couple of months. We had just moved her into Sedgwick Plaza, and she was beginning to connect with her neighbors. I was a bit of a helicopter son—I hovered as close as I could to assist her in making the transition. One morning in her first week there, I dropped in around lunchtime to ensure she was doing okay. I first checked the dining room, but there was only a group of ladies playing cards, and I didn't see mom, so I went up to her apartment, knocked, and there was no answer. I had a key, so I opened the door, calling out for mom, and again there was no answer. This had never happened before, so I was a little concerned. Then I thought, she must be out at the fountain because that's where she had found a spot where she could sit and paint. So, I went back downstairs and out to the fountain, and again, no mom. The panic was starting to rise a bit in me—Sedgwick Plaza is independent and assisted living, but they don't have locks on their doors and gates; people can come and go as they please. I had this image of my mom, after only a week in a new home, wandering down the street, and my imagination started to go into overdrive.

 When I opened the door to go back into the building, I happened to notice the ladies playing cards again, and I looked closer, and there was mom, in a new dress and with a new hairdo—no wonder I didn't notice her! No one at her card game table had seen me, so I just turned around, grinned to myself, and left the building very happy. Mom had found a way to belong. She was going to be just fine—and as my sister Teresa told me, mom would have thrived there if she hadn't gotten sick. It's one of my favorite memories of mom's brief time at Sedgwick Plaza because her Spirit found a way to belong—and she was actively working on belonging—she put herself out there- made herself open and vulnerable—and was having a great time. I'm so grateful that mom found a way to belong to a new community before passing. It was one last sweet lesson for her to teach me. And I am so thankful that all throughout my life, she taught me how to be open and vulnerable and allow others in—even though it hurts sometimes. As grief expert Hillary Stanton Zunin puts it: "The risk of love is loss, and the price of loss is grief - But the pain of grief is only a shadow when compared with the pain of never risking love." If we don't try—then we might as well give up. And the lyricist Brian Yorkey put the same thought so powerfully in his musical "Next To Normal": "The price of love is loss, but still we pay. We love anyway." Or these words from a new musical that I can't stop obsessing over, Hadestown—a fresh take on the old myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Composer and lyricist Anais Mitchell has the character Hermes say this: "It's a sad song--It's a sad tale, it's a tragedy. It's a sad song--But we sing it anyway--Cause, here's the thing: To know how it ends and still begin to sing it again as if it might turn out this time. I learned that from a friend of mine."

 If loneliness is anything, it's a spiritual disease, and the church is a first-aid station ready to help you with this disease. University Church offers you many ways to belong. You can work at the hygiene pantry, you can join our Thursday morning discussion group, you can sing in our choir, you can join us—in-person—for Sunday worship, you can risk putting yourself out there and agree to serve on one of our church boards, you can make a financial commitment to the life of this church—in fact, that's something everyone can do regardless of your personal level of belonging. Helping the missions and ministry of this congregation financially is an excellent way to help in your belonging to this place. The things we invest in with our time and our talents, and our treasure are the things we believe in. I've said it before—if you don't know where your priorities lie, take a look at your checkbook, and it will tell you in very stark terms where your priorities are—the things you spend money on are the things you believe in—whether you like to admit it or not. Believe in this church, belong to this church, and this church will then belong to you.

 We live, we love, we sing, we hope, we have ineffable moments where we feel connected to each other and to God. Sometimes we're connected, and sometimes we are alone. That is a sad song. But we sing it anyway. One day, in Heaven, we will all be reunited in God and with each other. Our shards of lights will finally have found their way home. That's a song I can sing. May you learn the tune and sing it with me. Amen

RESOURCES

The Holy Bible, NRSV Version

<https://www.allmusicals.com/lyrics/hadestown/roadtohellii.htm>

<https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/loneliness-in-america>

<https://www.mygriefassist.com.au/inspiration-resources/quotes/>

https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/tikkun-olam-repairing-the-world/

<https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/01/23/798676465/most-americans-are-lonely-and-our-workplace-culture-may-not-be-helping>