

"It's Not Good to be Alone."
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
September 8, 2019- AM Sermon
Rev. Peter Jonker
Genesis 2:18

In his new book *The Second Mountain*, David Brooks tells two contrasting stories about community. In the late 50's, Jane Jacobs was looking out the window of her Greenwich Village apartment when she saw a man struggling with a young girl. He was trying to lead the girl somewhere and, obviously, the girl did not want to go with him. She was resisting his lead, and he was increasingly forceful. Jacobs worried that she was witnessing a kidnapping, and she was just about to go downstairs to intervene when she noticed other neighbors coming out of their house. The couple who owned the butcher shop came out of the store to see what was going on, the man who ran the fruit stand left his produce to make sure everything was OK. Soon the locksmith was there along with a few people from the laundromat. All sorts of neighbors moved toward the situation to make sure everything was OK. It was a picture of the community caring for each other.

Fast forward to a few years ago. A young couple from Israel had recently moved into an affluent neighborhood in southern California. One night, while her husband was out of town for work, just before she was about to go to bed, the young wife went to check on the couple's four-year-old son who she'd put to bed a couple of hours earlier. When she got to the room, she found the boy's bed empty. She searched the house from top to bottom but she couldn't find her child. Starting to panic, she ran out into her neighborhood and began to shout the boy's name. She was worried that her son had wandered outside or worse, someone had taken him. She ran up and down the street shouting his name and calling for help, but none of the neighbors responded. A few lights came on in the windows, but not one person came out of their homes. No one was willing to share her struggle. Everyone kept their distance. Dismayed, she did one more search of her house and found her boy asleep under a blanket in the basement family room. The next day a couple of neighbors politely asked if everything was OK, but that was the extent of their involvement.

I think most of you who have lived a few years in this country will agree that these two incidents tell a story about how things have changed in our society. It is a story of a breakdown in trust. It is a story of the growth of fear. It is a story of loneliness. Not only is the story of the young woman crying alone in the street a depressing story, as Christians we can say it's far from how God intends things to be. In verse 18 of our passage God makes His intentions clear: "*It is not good for the man to be alone.*" We are not meant to be on our own. We are meant to help each other. God says we are meant to be in community. He makes his point emphatically. Up until now, everything in God's world has been good. The earth and sky? Good. The sun and the moon and the stars? Good. The birds and the fish and the other animals? Good. Human beings made in the image of God? *Very* good. But now suddenly God sees Adam standing by himself and he says, "THAT's not good." The contrast is striking. It's meant to hit the reader between the eyes. God says, with emphasis, 'I made you for community.'

God creates this community by making Eve. Here is real friend and partner. Eve is bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh, someone to help him with his work, someone he can laugh with when one of the animals does something goofy, someone with whom he can share the story of his day. And for one glorious verse it all works. The two of them have perfect communion.

That's the last verse of our passage. "Adam and his wife were both naked and they felt no shame." There's Adam and Eve, standing hand in hand in this beautiful place. They are one with the fruitful land that God has given them. They are one with their Maker, walking beside him in the cool of the day. And they are one with each other. "They were naked and they felt no shame." That nakedness suggests two people who are totally comfortable with one another.

It lasts one verse. In chapter 3, the whole thing comes apart. The perfect couple sin against God and against each other and the communion falls to pieces. By the end of the chapter instead of having intimacy with God and each other, they are setting up walls and making accusations. By the end of the chapter they are pointing fingers at each other and literally running from God. And that's how loneliness happens. *That's how loneliness grows.* We sin. Our sin destroys trust and creates fear. The fear and suspicion cause us to push each other away. Pretty soon we're hiding from God and looking for fig leaves. Pretty soon we're locking our doors and hiding when we hear the young mother crying for help in our neighborhood. Pretty soon we are all alone.

We live in a lonely society. It's ironic: we are more prosperous than ever, we are more technologically advanced than ever, we have more communication devices than ever that should be able to connect us to people, and yet all the data shows that we seem to be getting worse at creating community. A survey released last month in this country reported that 22 percent of millennials said that they had no close friends. Not one. In England a recent study identified 200,000 elderly Brits who said they hadn't talked to any family members in the last month. In Britain, loneliness was so prevalent that in 2018 the UK government founded the ministry for loneliness – a government branch dedicated to connecting people.

Here at LaGrave we will not be creating a government branch, but we have decided to spend a good part of the fall thinking together about a Christian practice that is much needed in lonely times. This fall we will all think about hospitality and we will try to grow together in our practice of hospitality. What is Hospitality? The practice has several salient features. Hospitality is not entertaining. When we entertain someone we focus on fun. When we entertain our goal is to make sure the other person has a good time. Nothing wrong with that. But as the name suggests, hospitality is aimed at more than another person's fun. Hospitality has the word hospital in it, so when you practice hospitality your welcome aims at healing. When you show someone hospitality, you aim to give space for what is broken or weary in them. You might have fun as part of the process, but you aim to give rest to their souls.

Hospitality is a deeply Biblical practice. Both the Old and New testaments give examples of it. Both Old and New testaments call us to do it. The practice is rooted in our passage, which tells us we are created for helping community. In Leviticus 19, Hospitality is commanded. Israel is told to leave the gleanings of their harvest for the poor and foreigner so that they can have a place in society. In the book of Ruth, Hospitality is modelled by Boaz who goes out of his way to welcome Ruth into the barley fields at Bethlehem—showing her kindness that fills up the lives of both Ruth and Naomi. Hospitality is commanded by Paul in Romans 12:13. Hospitality is commanded by Peter in 1 Peter 4:9. Hospitality is urged by John in 3 John 1:8. And hospitality was modelled by Jesus himself when he welcomed the children and when he ate with the sinners.

Hospitality has grit. Real hospitality is not easy or convenient. Real hospitality is not safe. Real hospitality invites complications. Relationships are always a little inconvenient, but when you practice hospitality and you get involved with people's weariness and hurt, you are taking inconvenience to a whole new level. It takes courage to be the person who runs out of your house toward that woman crying out on the street for her lost child. You could get caught

up in tragedy, maybe even violence! It could cost you more than time, it could cost you tears and anguish and even blood. Hospitality has grit.

Incidentally here is where modern social media devices fail to help us much in our loneliness. Smart phones and social media are not to blame for our loneliness – there are good ways and bad ways to use them. Unfortunately, too often social media is used badly. A lot of the time, we use our devices to make communication more convenient. *But often, when we make communication convenient, we take out all the grit!* We take out the face to face and we lose something essential.

Just one homely example of how that can happen. 20 years ago if a group of your child's friends came over to pick up your kid to go to a football game how did that pickup go? They would come up to the door and knock. "Hi Mr Jonker! Is Patrick there? We're ready to go!" And you'd call your son and he'd come down, but in the meantime you'd have a nice little conversation with these teenage boys. You'd connect. Now how do kids pick each other up? They text from the driveway. No connection. Is it more convenient to text from the driveway? Sure. It avoids meeting Patrick's Dad and having him ask you all those awkward questions, but something important is lost. You've lost one more small way in which we build community. Adults do the same thing of course. We text from the driveway. We avoid the grit of community for the sake of convenience.

It's no wonder loneliness is on the rise. Without grit, without inconvenience without struggle there is no real community. Think about it: Over the arc of your life, who are you closest to? It's the people you bled with, right? It's the people who went through trials with you, the people who were willing to weep with you, the people who saw you at your worst and still didn't move away. You can't have deep love without grit.

Finally, Hospitality is the sign of a healthy church. Here's one of my favorite quotes from my summer of reading. It's from Jean Vanier, the founder of l'Arche, the international community of homes for the developmentally disabled. Vanier says this: "*Welcome is one of the signs that a community is alive. To invite others to live with us is a sign that we are not afraid, that we have a treasure of truth and peace to share. A community which refuses welcome, whether through fear, weariness or insecurity, a desire to cling to comfort, or just because it is fed up with visitors – is dying spiritually.*" It's hard not to read that quote and immediately ask the question, is LaGrave a hospitable church? Do we practice that gritty, risky hospitality that brings healing? Let me ask a couple of diagnostic questions aimed at you members. We come to church every Sunday here and see neighbors from the Heartside district walking around. Do you now or have you ever known the name of any of them? In the last 4 months, have you ever seen someone you don't know standing by themselves in the narthex or in the multi-purpose room, and then gone up and introduced yourself? There are many warm people at LaGrave and we can be friendly, but—and I stand under this word with the rest of you—I don't think there's any question that we have room to grow in the area of hospitality.

As we start to think about Hospitality and possibly growing in our hospitality, how appropriate that we start our journey at this table. Because here at this table we literally taste the gritty, sacrificial love of our God. If we have any hospitality in us, if we have any ability to give healing welcome, all that starts here at the table of the one who welcomes us at this table.

We said earlier that loneliness happens when people are afraid and move away from each other. This whole book is the story of a God who always moves towards us. This is the feast of a God who will not leave us alone. We see it already in Genesis chapter 3. Adam and Eve sin, they literally ruin away from God. What does God do? He goes after them. He seeks them out in the

garden. Where are you? He will not leave them alone. We see it in his history with Israel. Israel repeatedly turns its back on Him. They run after more convenient and less demanding gods. What does God do? He goes after them. He sends prophets who say, 'return to me!' He refuses to leave them alone. We see it most clearly in Jesus. A whole world is lost in its sin and its misery. The whole world is moving away from him. And what does God do? He goes after us. He comes right down into our midst. He comes to us face to face. He gets close enough for us to touch him.

Does getting this close to our pain and brokenness turn out to be inconvenient for him? Does that prove to be dangerous? Yes, it does. He will give his life so that we can come to this table and find a place where our loneliness is turned into fellowship. A place where we can have true fellowship with him and true communion with each other. So as we begin this journey of hospitality, come to the table and partake of the life-giving hospitality of your Lord.

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