

Welcoming the Lonely

Psalm 68:4-6

Introduction

What was the first thing that God declared “not good” in the world? Genesis 2:18 tells us, “It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” In other words, “being alone” indefinitely was declared to be “not good” for mankind. While animals were present and likely offered a degree of companionship, they were not a substitute for relationships with other humans. A human needs other humans. Men and women are not, as John Donne poetical stated, “islands unto themselves.” As those who bear God’s image, we were created to be in relationship with one another. And when we are not in relationship with others, we feel alone. We feel lonely. The feeling of loneliness is a lot like hunger in that it reminds us that we are missing out on something that we need in order to be sustained as humans.

I believe that many of us would acknowledge this to be the case after over a year of isolation and quarantine due to COVID-19. The relational toil that the pandemic that taken on our world should not be ignored. Take for instance what has happened in Japan. According to one news report that I read, Japan has appointed a "Minister of Loneliness" to try and reduce loneliness and social isolation among its residents as the country deals with rising suicide rates. During the month of October, more Japanese died from suicide than had died from COVID-19 in all of 2020. There were 2,153 suicide deaths that month and 1,765 total virus deaths up to the end of October, according to the Japanese National Police Agency.” Other studies show that “loneliness has been linked to a higher risk of health issues like heart disease, dementia, and eating disorders.”

To combat the loneliness, people have turned to many different things. Some have turned to substances like alcohol or drugs to numb the feelings of loneliness.

Others have turned to the fake intimacy of pornography. In one article that I read by Baylor professor Alan Jacobs, he recounted a heartbreaking story of an unnamed man who sent a request to company that produces custom pornography. Jacobs wrote that the unnamed man “wanted a porn actress to sit, fully clothed, cross-legged on a floor, and then look into the camera and say: ‘You are loved. Things are bad now, but they won’t always be. Suicide is not the answer.’” Jacobs offered this reflection on the man’s request

Why might a man, suffering as this nameless man was suffering, turn for help to people who make pornography? Perhaps because porn is fantasy, in the sense of a dream world in which your desires are fulfilled. But at least sometimes what we want is not sex as such but rather to live out a dream of human connection, a dream of warmth stronger and more comforting even than the warmth of bodies.

In other words, we hunger for connection with others. We know that loneliness is not what we were created for. It is as God said, “not good,” for us. Yet there is so much confusion in our present society regarding what it means to be in relationship with others. Social media has definitely impacted the way that we think about these things. We are “friends” with many people that we would likely not stop to speak with at the grocery store.

Even technology companies are trying to do their part to address this problem of loneliness by designing robots that will hold people's hands when they are lonely. But no matter how well-intentioned such companies may be, we all know deep down that a robot with artificial intelligence will not fill up what we sense is lacking in our relationships. God created us for more, and this morning, this is what we are going to look at in Psalm 68:4-6...

Psalm 68:4-6

Sing to God, sing in praise of his name,
 extol him who rides on the clouds;
 rejoice before him—his name is the LORD.
A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows,
 is God in his holy dwelling.
God sets the lonely in families,
 He leads out the prisoners with singing;
 But the rebellious live in a sun-scorched land.

Exposition

This section of Psalm 68 begins with a call to praise God. Specifically, we are called to “sing praise of his name,” which means we are to sing praise of His holy character. God has revealed Himself in both creation and in His Word, teaching us about Himself. As we see Him, we are called to praise Him, to rejoice before Him, because He is the LORD over all. There is no God like our God. In fact, the language of “extol him who rides on the clouds” is likely a reference to an ancient Near Eastern description of Baal, a false god who was worshiped by the nations surrounding Israel. In this Psalm, the LORD, not Baal, is described as the one who “rides on the clouds.” The LORD is greater than all of the false gods of the nations. He is worthy of our praise!

Verse 5 goes on to tell us more about the praiseworthy nature of our God, the LORD. He is the “father to the fatherless, a defender of widows,” even while dwelling in His holy dwelling. It is important to note here that while God is the one who “rides on the clouds,” He is not blind to the needs of the weak and oppressed. He is a father to the fatherless and a defender of the widow even while being the LORD of the universe. He cares about us. He sees our needs. He knows our weakness. And while He is the One who upholds all things by the power of the His Word, He remembers us. He knows our frame. And He defends us.

With the final verse in this section, we see God take the lonely, that is, the destitute, the abandoned, and set them in families. This is such a glorious picture of God's grace and mercy toward those in need. The fatherless and the widow who have no means of defense and who are often oppressed find refuge in God. He takes the lonely and sets them in homes. He sets the captive free, and yet He still brings judgment upon those who live in rebellion against Him. God is perfect in His justice.

But this morning, I want us to reflect specifically on this idea of how God sets the lonely in homes. When we read of how God “sets the lonely in homes,” we may be tempted to wonder, but “how does he do this?” Does God pick up the lonely and physically place them in homes? Or does God go about it differently than we may think?

Here is what I believe we must see from this passage: As the people of God, we are called to reflect God’s character, which means we are called to demonstrate concern for the lonely and invite them into our church and our homes.

This is the principles that I want us to walk from this passage with. That our great God of mercy and grace who welcomed us into His family through the good news of Jesus Christ, He calls us to care for and welcome the lonely into our congregation and into our lives. Consider these passages which teach us about the call on our lives to reflect God’s care to others:

1 John 4:7-8 – Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

Galatians 6:10 – Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

1 Timothy 3:15 – If I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God’s household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth.

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, we are family that God has assembled by His grace and for His glory. We are united by Christ’s love for us and our love for Christ. When anyone in the body suffers, we all suffer. My simple charge to you is to seek out the lonely and welcome them into your home as those who are called to reflect God’s care of the lonely.

The Gospel for the Lonely