

HOW CAN I BE LONELY

With 7.9 Billion People in the World?



EXPERIENCING LONLINESS

by Kirsten Stiver

When I was asked to speak this evening, I said, "You'll have to give me a topic and a time limit because I do love to talk!" But I also like to listen. Having a conversation, especially one that just naturally flows from one topic to the next, is how we connect with each other whether it's friends over a cup of coffee, neighbors over the backyard fence, or coworkers at the water cooler.

Conversation is something that we know is important from a very young age. My family moved when I was three years old. We'd come from a close-knit neighborhood in metro Detroit to a house on a busy road with only one neighbor, a widow who lived alone. Apparently, I was used to a steady stream of neighbors and friends and felt lonely in our new surroundings. My mother liked to tell the story of the day I ran to meet the mailman at the door, "Hi! Want to come in for a cup of coffee?"

WE'RE WIRED TO BE IN COMMUNITY



We're wired to be in community. For nine months before we're even born, we're "wired" to our mothers and listen to the voices of the people already in our lives.

Fast forward several decades. I've been married for over 20 years, have two teenagers (scratch that, a teen and a twenty!) and a crazy Black Lab who is constantly underfoot. How, you might ask, would I know anything about loneliness? Well, let's start with what's the opposite of loneliness - togetherness.

Here's a definition of togetherness from a high school student: "Togetherness is being with another person or group of people and having a sense of belonging. Togetherness may be found almost anywhere. A family who gathers at Christmas for a big dinner

who gathers at Christmas for a big dinner and to sing carols is said to be experiencing togetherness. A couple walking in a park exhibits togetherness. A slumber party is togetherness. Sitting with someone in front of a glowing fire is togetherness. Togetherness is something everyone needs to experience. It makes one feel needed and happy inside. One needs togetherness for survival. Without having a sense of love, being needed, and togetherness, life would not be worth living."

Listen to that last part again, "Without having a sense of love, being needed, and togetherness, life would not be worth living." Insightful words from a teenager.

Now, let's be honest, everyone has had times of loneliness or isolation at some point - myself included - even if it was short lived. Maybe it was being the last person picked for a team on the playground. Maybe it was going to a new school, starting a new job, or moving to a new town. Or, just maybe, it was sometime during this past year or two?

AN ATTACK ON TOGETHERNESS

COVID was more than a pandemic of illness, it was an attack on togetherness and the body of Christ. It's one thing to be in quarantine for two weeks like back in the days of Scarlett Fever before the advent of antibiotics (a completely different kind of advent!) but to be going on two years of confinement, regulations, OR some level of "social distancing"? Well, there's nothing social about being distanced from one another! We were created to be in community! In Genesis 2:18, "The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."

Even though society has opened back up to some extent depending on where you live or work, there is no denying the division and underlying fear of our fellow man the world-wide shutdown has created.

Weeks turned into months which, in many cases, turned into more than a year of being isolated from family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers. Then, even when we were "allowed" to leave our homes, we could gather in groups of no more than 10 and stay socially distanced even then.

I remember the first time I got to see my best friend in person but was afraid to hug her. My fears? Not of illness, but of being "turned in" for breaking that six-foot barrier. But, after asking her permission (weird, right?!?) we gave each other a big, long hug because, back to that high schooler's statement: "Without togetherness, life would not be worth living."

Interestingly, according to the (HALT) Humane Alternatives to Long Term Solitary Confinement Act, "Studies have consistently found that subjecting people to segregated confinement for 22 to 24 hours a day without meaningful human contact, programming, or therapy can cause deep and permanent psychological, physical, developmental, and social harm."



ISOLATION ERODES OUR COMMUNITY



If we know this about our incarcerated, doesn't it stand to reason that the same is true for the general population? God created us to be in community, to need love, physical touch and trust. COVID quarantine was hard on those of us with family at home; though we found ways to pass the time - we actually wore some of the dots off our Yahtzee dice and had to break into the Tenzi game for new dice!

But my heart ached for children in abusive homes, people who lived alone, the elderly, and especially those with Alzheimer's. It was the first time I'd felt a deep thankfulness that my mother, who had Alzheimer's, was no longer living. I couldn't imagine what living in isolation, without being able to grasp the concept of why it was happening, would have been like for her.

Isolation and loneliness erode our sense of community and leave us vulnerable to worry, anxiety, self-doubt, and fear. I'm going to focus on one of those vulnerabilities for a moment: self-doubt. You may have heard the trendy term for this, "Imposter Syndrome." I recently took a short, work-related course on "Imposter Syndrome," and while there was useful information on how to recognize it and combat it, I couldn't help but think throughout the whole webinar, "Let's just call it what it really is: Satan's Lies."

Now, I know a world-view webinar isn't going to call it that, but it is what it is whether it's named or not. Just like Jesus' birth is the reason for Christmas whether secular society names Him or not. Remember when God created Eve as a companion for Adam because it was not good for him to be alone? In Genesis 2:22 we're told, "Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man." Now, there's only three more verses in Genesis 2 so it sure didn't take long for Satan to slither onto the scene and start whispering lies to her.

CRAFTY LIES ARE HALF-TRUTHS

Genesis 3:1 explains, “Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, ‘Did God really say you must not eat from any tree in the garden?’”

Notice how he whispers lies that are half-truths. God really did say something about ‘any tree in the garden,’ but **that’s** not what He said. Eve gets caught up in Satan’s lies, half-truths, word play, and leading questions, and she ends up making a mistake of biblical proportions!

Interestingly enough, that webinar said that women are more prone to Imposter Syndrome because our levels of serotonin differ from those of men. I wonder if it isn’t just as likely that we are more vulnerable to Satan’s lies because of original sin.

Either way, when we are alone, we are more susceptible to self-doubt. (Ever wonder why the serpent approached Eve when she was alone?) There may be 7.9 billion people here, but the more technological we get, the more isolated we become. Just because we’re in a crowded room doesn’t mean we aren’t feeling lonely. And Satan loves lonely targets!

Sadly, one of the biggest lies when you’re lonely, is that no one will understand. Another is that if we reach out and admit that we need company, people will think we are weak. That negative self-talk in your head? Recognize it for what it is: lies whispered in your ear by the one who wants to destroy you. Do any of these lies sound familiar:

- “I cheated on my diet again, ***I’m such a failure!***”
- “I completely forgot that appointment! ***I can’t do anything right!***”
- “I’m not sure what my boss wants on this project. ***I’m so stupid!***”
- “No one will like my ideas, they’ll think ***I’m an idiot!***”



YOU ARE LOVED IN SPITE OF FLAWS



We are so hard on ourselves, why is that? I think part of it is not seeing ourselves as God sees us. How often is God referred to as “Father”? According to Answers.com, God is referred to as “Father” 13 times in the Old Testament and Jesus referred to God as His father over 150 times and our father 30 times in the New Testament. That’s nearly 200 references to God as Father.

Now, none of us are fathers, but some of us are mothers, and as parents, if our kids referred to themselves as stupid, a failure, an idiot, wouldn’t we reassure them they were wrong? We would explain how we see them and encourage them, reminding them that they are smart and resourceful and creative. We see them for the amazing children they are, as well as the potential to become even more!

Sure, they may not always clean their rooms, or do their chores, or get good grades, but we love them in spite of those flaws, just like God loves us in spite of ours...He sees us through HIS eyes, and He created us for a purpose!

A coworker recently shared this post:

“I saw them as wood scraps. She saw them as pieces of a chair and made them so. She measured, I cut. She put in the screws and I helped brace it as she worked.”

Here’s a father who listened to his daughter and then helped her bring her idea to fruition.

How many times do we have ideas but either dismiss them as dumb or let the naysayers tell us all the reasons it won’t work?



HOW DO YOU SEE YOURSELF?



God created you with a purpose, and He plants those seeds of dreams in your heart, those creative ideas in your mind. Let your Heavenly Father help you take those scraps in your life and make your “chair.” Better yet, stop looking at your ideas – and yourself – as a pile of wood scraps and start looking for the masterpiece that God wants you to become with his help!

Each of us has a wood pile and we can look at it and think it’s scraps, or look around at everyone else’s pile and think theirs is better than ours. We can each try and make something with just our own pile, or we can work together, share ideas, help each other, and create not just a chair, but a long table and many chairs where we can sit together and have a conversation over coffee about how thankful we are to have each other,

togetherness, community, the body of Christ, and how blessed we are to celebrate His birth at Christmas each year.

He was laid in a manger at birth and became a carpenter by trade. Then he died on a cross as payment for the sins of the world – from Adam and Eve to you and me and beyond. Whenever you are feeling lonely or isolated and those lies of self-doubt are whispered in your ear, remember, Satan is the imposter, not you. You are an amazing, unique creation of the Most High, Living God, Heavenly Father!

His word tells us, “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.” Psalm 139:13-16.



If you are here tonight and don't know the Lord, He knows you. He loves you and He sent His son, Jesus, into this world – true God and true Man – to live a perfect life and die a sacrificial death. But it doesn't end there, he rose from the grave overcoming sin, death, and Satan – the father of all lies – and provided us the gift of salvation. And that's better than ANY gift under any tree!

Let's pray together:

Heavenly Father, thank you for your abounding love. Thank you for knitting us together in our mother's wombs and for your plan for each and every one of our lives. May we listen to your word and be in community and togetherness to strengthen each other and reach out to those who may be isolated or lonely. Help us to recognize the lies of Satan for what they are and to live our lives as your LOVED children. In Jesus' name, Amen.