

**+ Acts 2:42-47 + Series: Why Are We Here? + Theme: ...To Connect People to God's People +
+ 21st Sunday after Pentecost + 9 October 2016 +**

They call it “crowded loneliness.” Basically it’s feeling lonely even though you’re not alone. For example, you’re in a crowd of 500 people or walking along a busy street or even spending time with a group of your best friends, yet you feel alone. It’s often associated with clinical depression.

While crowded loneliness can be a symptom of a larger mental health issue, you don’t have to be diagnosed with clinical depression to have it. In fact, I would go so far as to say that we, our families, our neighborhoods, our communities, even our society as a whole are suffering from crowded loneliness. Why would I say that? You don’t have to look too far to see it.

Look around you and what do you see? You see a world where people are connected with each other in more ways than ever before. You could say we are “hyperconnected.” The rapid surge of technological advances is breathtaking. Our world has become a much smaller place. You can have a face-to-face conversation with someone on the other side of the world without leaving home. You have an almost limitless amount of information at your fingertips enabling you to know just about everything about a person’s life without ever meeting that person. You can watch events unfold before they become “news.” New ways to connect with the world pop up every day, but still we seem to become lonelier every day.

Despite all the new ways to connect with each other, more and more people are feeling disconnected. You can have 1,000 friends or followers on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat, yet you know no one and no one knows you. Smartphones have enabled us to personally connect with so many people and have access to so much information, but the next time you’re at Destiny USA, count how many people are staring at their smartphones as they walk...that is, if you can look up from your own phone first. When you go out to eat, notice how many people actually put their phones away, look at, and talk to each other for an entire meal—assuming you put your phone down too.

As a society, we are becoming more and more isolated, which leads to more and more “crowded loneliness.” We live next to each other, but how well do you actually know your neighbors and actually have a friendly relationship with them? Years ago, a common feature of home architecture was a large front porch so you could enjoy nice weather outside and interact with your neighbors. Today, most porches have disappeared and been replaced with homes that have all the isolating characteristics of Superman’s Fortress of Solitude. We have no problem communicating our thoughts or emotions through social media, but when it comes to real, face-to-face relationships, well... we struggle to have a personal connection with the people who matter most. It takes a lot of intentional effort to build personal relationships in which we regularly gather together, eat together, and actually talk. In a hyperconnected world, we all seem to suffer from crowded loneliness.

Of course, that’s not what God had in mind when he created Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. He didn’t create people to be disconnected and alone. He created them to connect with him and with each other in close relationships. He wanted us to do life together as opposed to interaction solely or mostly through technology. He created us to associate with each other, to have fellowship with each other. When sin came into our world, however, that unity, that fellowship, that connection with God and with each other was torn apart, that is, until Jesus came along to unite us again.

Now Jesus didn’t come to create world peace, but he did come to make our world at one with God again. We call that his work of “atonement.” Jesus reconciled us with God. Jesus made us at peace once again with the holy God. Jesus restored our connection with God. He took what sin and guilt and death had so brutally torn apart and healed our connection with God with his own holy, precious blood. Using a heavy, wooden cross and an empty tomb, Jesus made us at one with God again.

...But what about that connection between you and me and other people? Sin has torn those relationships apart too. Recall how Adam basically threw his own wife Eve under the bus and tried to pin the blame for their disobedience solely on her, whom God had created for him. Recall how blame and discord and shame and guilt filled their lives and the lives of every generation since. With generations and millennia of torn and disconnected relationships behind us and the reality of selfish sin in every heart around us and within us, we can’t hope for some utopian form of world peace, but didn’t Jesus come to heal our relationships with each other too?

The answer to that question takes us to the exciting, joy-filled days right after Pentecost. It was a rare time of true peace and unity in the life of the Christian church. It was a time of beautiful and sincere unity, really the

last time all of Christianity was united in the truest and most honest sense of the word. Now at the time, the Christian church was still quite small. The total number of Christians worldwide only numbered around 3-4,000 people with the largest concentration of them around Jerusalem.

The number of Christians had been much smaller only a few weeks before numbering about 500 at most, but the Lord Jesus had promised to his disciples that he would pour out his Holy Spirit. He would give them the ability to boldly, clearly, and faithfully proclaim his Word. He would give them the ability to perform miraculous signs not to convert people, but to support the preaching of his Word, to show that the God they proclaimed is the true and mighty Savior-God. And the Lord did exactly that. On the Jewish festival day of Pentecost, the Lord poured out his Holy Spirit. For the first time, people heard in their own languages the good news that God's long-promised Savior had come. Jesus' disciples, who had been hiding for their lives behind locked doors only 50 days before, were now boldly and clearly proclaiming the Word of God to the thousands gathered in Jerusalem. On that day, about 3,000 people came to faith in Jesus and were baptized.

So what happened when that joyful day of Pentecost was finally over? Did everyone go back to their homes and lives as if nothing had changed? Did they isolate themselves from the rest of the world? No! That faith planted in their hearts by the Holy Spirit through the gospel changed their eternities, reconnected them with God, and move them to speak about Jesus with others. Yet they also wanted to connect with other believers who had come to faith like them through the preaching of the Word.

...But they weren't just getting together for coffee and donuts or a potluck meal. No, the inspired writer Luke tells us, ***"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."*** These new believers didn't isolate themselves or go back to life as normal, but they wanted to get together. They shared a common faith, so they devoted themselves to the teaching of God's Word and to the blessings that come through God's Word and Baptism and his Supper. They devoted themselves to hearing the clear teaching that Jesus had commanded his apostles to teach. They shared in each other's joys and woes and needs and opportunities. They were closely knit together. They gathered together for fellowship meals, which usually concluded with a celebration of the Lord's Supper, and they prayed together for one another.

Yet these early Christians didn't just spend time together in their homes. They spent time together worshiping in the temple, praising their gracious Savior and encouraging one another. They shared in the Lord's work. They generously supported one another, especially those in need, out of genuine love for their Lord and each other. They joyfully and sincerely gathered together as brothers and sisters in Christ, praising the Savior-God who had brought them together across cultures and backgrounds. Luke tells us, ***"All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people."***

You see, people noticed the sincere joy and humility and true unity of the Christians. People noticed the powerful teaching of the apostles and the many wonders and miraculous signs they did. For the Christians, they knew who was behind this beautiful unity in the Christian church. Jesus had brought true unity to this group of people from diverse backgrounds and cultures and races, by healing what sin and guilt had torn apart between them and God and each other. So how did the people in the community respond? ***"Everyone was filled with awe... [The Christians enjoyed] the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were saved."*** How they lived and spoke and acted towards others and each other made an eternal impact. People noticed and they were impressed. People began to ask why. So they heard the gospel and many more were reconciled with God.

There's something to be said about a Christian congregation that loves to spend time together. Even more so, when the members of that Christian congregation devote themselves to gathering around the Word together in worship and Bible study, devote themselves to gathering around the Lord's Table and the family table, devote themselves to gathering together for each other in prayer, devote themselves to gathering around one another to mutually support and encourage, to admonish and comfort one another, when a Christian congregation devotes itself to those kinds of gatherings, the Lord opens his hand of blessing. Faith grows. Sins are confessed and absolved. Tears are dried and hugs given. Joy and laughter are shared. Hearts are encouraged and emboldened. Help is provided. Work is shared and undertaken. Lives are changed. Others notice and the gospel is shared. Above all, God is praised.

When a Christian congregation devotes itself to gathering together, the Lord provides a true and beautiful unity around the Word and worship and fellowship. Yet it's not something that occurs in a vacuum or behind closed doors or in the private isolation of our own homes—although we can gather with other believers around the world in amazing technological ways today, but it occurs out there in the real world beyond those doors. While that's tough for a congregation like ours with members scattered across central and southern New York, you can see how the Lord has blessed our fellowship, our unity as a congregation when you and I are connected with God's people. Our God has blessed that connection and it has changed our lives!

In a world dominated by crowded loneliness, by disconnection and isolation, it is absolutely and vitally important that we never lose this precious fellowship, this beautiful unity that our Savior-God has created among us. Yes, we will never have a utopian world peace this side of heaven, but we have a Savior who reconciled the world to himself and heals our discord, our disunity, and our disagreements. After all, the Church is the one place in all of humanity where people of many cultures, backgrounds, languages, and social strata are truly united. Someday we will see that unity in full in the glories of heaven, but until then, may our God preserve his Church. Amen.