

It's Not Good for Men to Be Alone

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

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Texts: Philippians 2:1-8

Luke 14:15-24

“Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in,
so that my house may be filled.”

~ Luke 14:23

Prayer

**God who gives our daily bread and loves food on the table,
Feed us with the spiritual nourishment we need
To be a church that is full of vitality, hope, compassion,
Friendship, faith and people. Amen.**

The cast of Saturday Night Live probably did not expect to blow the lid off a national health crisis with a splendidly clever and funny sketch.¹ Aired in the fall of 2021, the SNL skit titled “*Man Park*” touched on a topic that has remained mostly off the radar screen of churches like ours, which is the loneliness that males, especially cisgender heterosexual men, experience in America.

The sketch begins with Pete Davidson’s character sitting on a sofa alone at home while the narrator sets the stage for the skit with some basic stats. “***According to studies,***” the gentle and clear female voice states, “***many men say they have no close friendships. And three in four report receiving all their emotional support from the wife or girlfriend, often the moment they come home from work.***”

Heidi Gardner and Ego Nwodim play the wives who worry that their husbands do not have male friends and rely solely on them for emotional support and meaningful human interaction. At one point in the sketch, Heidi Gardner’s character looks at the camera and speaks with a concerned tone, “***When I walk in the door my husband sort of rockets information at me for 25 minutes straight ... all the words come out fast and in the wrong order, because he hasn’t spoken to anyone else that day.***” The scene cuts back to Ego Nwodim’s character encouraging her husband to go out of the house and make friends so he can talk to other people and not just her. Her husband replies with surprise and disbelief at her suggestion, “***That’s insane! Where would I even go?***” The narrator’s voice comes on again and says, “***Finally, there is a place with Man Park. It’s like a dog park but for guys in relationships so they can make friends and have an outlet besides their girlfriends and wives.***”

Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

At the “Man Park,” the wives and girlfriends hang back on the sidelines relieved while the men meet, chat, play, interact, bond with other guys and celebrate their newly forged friendships over an IPA poured from a public tap.

One shy boyfriend hides under a picnic table until his girlfriend urges him to join the other guys. “**Go on,**” she says softly, “**Go say ‘hi.’**” As the introverted man starts walking toward the other fellows at the park, the narrator returns to spotlight the real-life issue at the root of the “*friendship recession*”² among American males. “**It’s not [men’s] fault masculinity makes intimacy so hard.**” And Heidi Gardner’s character gives us a glimpse into the challenge we all face to talk honestly about male loneliness in our society and, to be frank, in the church. “**Men are taught it’s weak to rely on each other.**” Heidi Gardner’s character notes and then goes on, “**So, I guess in that way, and don’t quote me on this, it’s harder to be a man.**” Then she realizes what she’s just said and panics, “**Wait! No. Is this filming? Don’t show my face saying that!**”

There isn’t much of a cultural appetite, especially in progressive circles, to hear stories about heterosexual men’s vulnerabilities along with the complex universe of masculinity that all men must inhabit and navigate. Last week, I myself wondered if it would be wise to show my face at the pulpit on a Sunday during Women’s History Month with an invitation to our church to reflect on this alarming pattern of chronic male loneliness in America. But, as people of faith whose Holy Scriptures emphasize that God wants a full house with all the seats around God’s table taken, we cannot ignore that a growing number of men are facing a friendship crisis that has real ramifications for the church and unfavorable implications for the social contract that holds our nation together. The reason the video of the SNL skit went viral so quickly – it reached 5 million views in only a couple of days and we are still talking about it – is because the social message wrapped in comedy the sketch delivers hit home for millions of men who were allowed to face the truth of male loneliness with the help of some humor. Still, finding friends is far from being as easy as going for a walk in the park for most men and rather than dismissing this reality because of twenty-first-century sensibilities, we should be asking ourselves how we can offer genuine Christian friendship to men who were raised to swallow their emotions, place an unhealthy value on self-reliance, and never talk about mental illness or show affection for another man.

I was struck by the comment one man posted on YouTube after watching the skit. He wrote, “**Jesus’s biggest miracle was he had 12 close male friends at age 30.**” Of course, there had to be a smarty-pants in the group to point out that...well... Jesus had 11 close friends after all there was, you know, Judas.

What this light-hearted banter reveals at its core is that men in America have fewer and fewer friends.³ There is still an unspoken but real yearning for close and meaningful friendship with other males and, yet it appears that somehow the innate capacity for friendship is being lost or stifled by higher geographic mobility, delayed marriage, longer work hours, overly involved parenting, and society’s subliminal

gendered message to guys “to man up” and “go it alone.”⁴ In this friendless environment where two-thirds of males between the ages of 18 to 23 claim that there is no one that really knows them⁵ and 15% of men say they have no close friends at all,⁶ cisgender, heterosexual males are relying more intensely on their wives and girlfriends for connection, emotional support and to maintain a social network. And this trend is not good for women or for men. It is not good for men to be stuck in a “friendship recession” without vibrant connections with other men.

Studies show that social isolation and loneliness affect the human body, mind, and spirit. Men who struggle silently with feelings of extended social disconnection are at a greater risk for depression, addiction, cardiovascular disease, and premature death⁷ quite often by suicide.⁸ Social alienation is also a strong predictor of political and religious extremist views in males of all ages.⁹

Last year, the New York Times published an article in which they profiled 50 years of mass shootings. The active killers were almost all heterosexual white men who share similar traits of isolation and loneliness. The article described them as men who thought their co-workers were conspiring against them, who isolated themselves from their friends and faith communities, stopped communicating with their families, had considered suicide or who were depressed, withdrawn and quiet with no friends.¹⁰

Friendship is both life-saving and life-giving! And the lack of lasting authentic and intimate friendships among thousands of men in our country should be a cause of great concern for us because loneliness and alienation can and often do have deadly consequences for individuals and for our society as a whole. As the Apostle Paul advised the early Christians in Philippi, anyone who is a follower of Christ must be willing to forget themselves long enough to help, support and love others. Much like Jesus emptied himself of his divine privileges to live among us as one of us and placed our physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing front and center in his ministry, our church is called at this time in our history to go after all those men who are struggling alone and without friends with an invitation to hang out and to get together in a safe and welcoming space where men are able to create deeper connections with other guys and experience the healing power of emotional intimacy and friendship with other men of hope and faith.

In case you are wondering, I am indeed suggesting that this is the right time for our church to have some kind of lay-led men’s fellowship group. I know that all-male spaces and programs have become a controversial topic and divisive issue in churches, but as Heidi Gardner’s character said so well being a man, especially a man who does not want to remain trapped in the toxic masculinity of our society and wants to be able to be vulnerable and ask for help, is hard, and the church can choose to be part of the solution for male loneliness. We can create a sacred space in this building or elsewhere where men can confront the social disconnection of our times by coming together to

grow our relational capacity for friendship and live healthier, happier, more fulfilling, more dynamic and more faithful lives.

Almost 7 years ago, the General Surgeon of the United States Dr. Vivek Murthy sounded the alarm on what he described as an epidemic of loneliness in the nation.¹¹ Dr. Murthy said, “***Loneliness is like hunger or thirst; it’s a signal that we are lacking something essential for survival.***”¹² Last year, Dr. Murthy wrote a guest essay for the New York Times entitled “*Surgeon General: We Have Become a Lonely Nation. It’s Time to Fix That.*”¹³ Dr. Vivek ends the article with a message that we, as a church, need to pay attention and take to heart. “***Every generation is called to take on challenges that threaten the underpinnings of society. Addressing the crisis of loneliness and isolation is one of our generation’s greatest challenges. By building more connected lives and more connected communities, we can strengthen the foundation of our individual and collective well-being... This work will take all of us: schools, workplaces, community organizations, government, health workers, public health professionals, individuals, families and more working together. And it will be worth it because our need for human connection is like our need for food and water: essential for our survival.***”

In the parable Jesus shared with the Pharisees and his guests - by the way, this is still the same sabbath dinner from last week when Jesus told the guests not to seek the places of honor at the table and encouraged his host to invite the underprivileged to eat at his table. So, Jesus continues to carry on a lively conversation at the table of the leader of the Pharisees, and this morning he touches on an important lesson for all of us, that is, to be part of a connected community that is capable of fostering human well-being through solid and nurturing friendships we have to show honest and sincere interest in other people and be unselfish with our time.

In the parable, the original guests gave perfectly reasonable reasons to explain their absence at the banquet. One man had bought a piece of land and he chose to go check it out. Another man had purchased five pairs of oxen and wanted to try them out. And another male guest had just gotten married and had other priorities in mind. Not one single guest took into account that to create community, to nurture friendship, to be meaningfully connected with others, we have to be willing to show up, to put ourselves, our personal interests, our priorities aside for some time every day to practice being friends to each other. It was quite telling that at the Lenten gathering last Wednesday evening when people were asked what brought them back to the pews when churches re-opened and started re-gathering in person again the answer was not God, Christ, beliefs, dogmas, but the sense of community and friendship shared by the people who gather in Christ’s name.

Community and friendship are essential for human flourishing, and I cannot imagine another organization or institution that is better equipped to help men escape the trap of the “*friendship recession*” of the twenty first century than the Church.

Communal life is in our spiritual DNA. We know what it takes to live fully engaged lives in vibrant and connected communities of friends. We know how to nurture real and lasting connections with one another. We know how to model and embrace a different kind of manhood that gives men in the church the ability to develop emotional intelligence and widen the emotional capacity to care for and love each other. We know that from the beginning God said that it is not good for human beings to be alone.¹⁴ We know that our faith and the Gospel instruct us to make a priority of seeking out those who are missing from our community and are craving for close friends. The question for our church is whether we are ready and willing to be unselfish and generous with our time to create a space here where men can relearn to connect on a deeper emotional level with other males and people other than their wives and girlfriends.

I pray that you and I will continue to choose to answer God's invitation to life in community, surrounded by friends. I hope that our church will rise to this occasion and will make a priority of confronting this crisis of male loneliness by inviting the men in our pews and in the community outside these walls to hang out and forge meaningful friendships. Perhaps we can even drink a glass of IPA in Hartman Hall together!

My hope and my prayer are that we will make an intentional effort to reach out to men living with fewer or no friends at all because we understand that this ministry of love is deserving of every minute of our time.

Friendship saves, enriches and prolongs life. For at least 300,000 years, homo sapiens have thrived in connected communities, and it has never been good for men to be alone. So friends, let us not waste any opportunity to go out and invite men to come into this sacred place to find and cultivate life-saving emotional connections. As Dr. Murthy put it, friendship is still our best strategy to counter the epidemic of social isolation and alienation in our society and every effort to help men make friends is worth it because human connection is essential for all of us to live full lives as God intended from the beginning.

May the wisdom of our Creator who made us to live with and among friends inspire us all to deepen our emotional connections with one another and seek out those who are missing from our community, especially cisgender, heterosexual men who feel disconnected and do not know how to ask for help.

May it be so. Amen.

¹ SNL Man Park, 14 November 2021 [<https://youtu.be/9XOt2Vh0T8w?si=actLjaM-jXv4x3nB>].

² By Daniel A. Cox in American Men Suffer a Friendship Recession, Survey Center on American Life, 06 July 2021 [<https://www.americansurveycenter.org/commentary/american-men-suffer-a-friendship-recession/>]

³ Equimundo – Research Reports, State of American Men 2023 [<https://www.equimundo.org/resources/state-of-american-men/>].

⁴ By Daniel A. Cox in The State of American Friendship: Change, Challenges, and Loss, Survey Center on American Life, 08 June 2021 [<https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/the-state-of-american-friendship-change-challenges-and-loss/>].

⁵ Equimundo – Research Reports, State of American Men 2023 [<https://www.equimundo.org/resources/state-of-american-men/>].

⁶ By Daniel A. Cox in Men's Social Circles are Shrinking, Survey Center on American Life, 29 June 2021 [<https://www.americansurveycenter.org/why-mens-social-circles-are-shrinking/>].

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Equimundo – Research Reports, State of American Men 2023 [<https://www.equimundo.org/resources/state-of-american-men/>].

⁹ By Brad Stulberg in Extended Loneliness Can Make You More Vulnerable to Extremist Views, Ideas-Health, Time, 03 November 2022 [<https://time.com/6223229/loneliness-vulnerable-extremist-views/>].

¹⁰ By Jillian Peterson and James Densley in We Profiled the 'Signs of Crisis' in 50 Years of Mass Shootings. This Is What We Found, Opinion, The New York Times, 26 January 2023 [<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/01/26/opinion/us-mass-shootings-despair.html>]

¹¹ By Vivek Murthy in Work and the Loneliness Epidemic, Harvard Business Review, 26 September 2017, [<https://hbr.org/2017/09/work-and-the-loneliness-epidemic>].

¹² U.S. Department of Human Services, Office of the U.S. General Surgeon, Current Priorities of the General Surgeon, House Calls Podcast in You Are Not Alone in Feeling Lonely, 02 May 2023 [<https://www.hhs.gov/surgeongeneral/priorities/house-calls/loneliness-q-a/index.html>].

¹³ By Vivek H. Murthy in Surgeon General: We Have Become a Lonely Nation. It's Time to Fix That, Guest Essay, New York Times, 30 April 2023 [<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/30/opinion/loneliness-epidemic-america.html>].

¹⁴ Genesis 2:18.