

“Friendship”

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

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Texts: Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Matthew 4:19-22

*“And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’
Immediately they left their nets and followed him.”*

~ Matthew 4:19-20

Prayer

God-with-us,

May the words of my mouth

And the meditations of our hearts

Bring us closer to you and to one another. Amen.

The longest-running scientific study of adult life on record offers a surprisingly uncomplicated and very practical answer to a question humankind has been asking since the first *Homo sapiens* arose in Africa and wondered out loud how human beings could live a good life. Develop and cultivate strong, deep, genuine, honest, stable, warm and life-affirming relationships. According to Dr. Robert Waldinger, the Director of the Harvard Study on Adult Development that was launched in 1938, this is the answer! The secret to live a long, healthy, happy, meaningful, rewarding and good life lies in the quality of our relationships with other people. Dr. Waldinger noted that this is the most unexpected revelation the 85-year-old study has produced so far, that is, the best and most reliable predictor of whom is more likely to thrive in life is not social class, professional success, zip code, IQ or genetics, but people’s level of satisfaction with and commitment to their relationships. Those who are more socially connected to family, friends and their community often enjoy longer, healthier and happier lives.

Our lengthy evolutionary journey has wired us to seek safety in numbers, create lasting bonds of friendship with others, and work together around issues that can ensure the flourishing of human life and civilization. We are more emotionally fulfilled, spiritually grounded and physically energized when we have spouses, significant others, children, close friends and neighbors in our lives. Studies conducted by psychologists and neuroscientists confirm that tending to our relationships in a very intentional manner through life’s ups and downs is essential not only to our happiness, but also to our mental and physical well-being. Spending time with a friend is in fact a wise and selfless way to practice self-care because friendship leads to greater health, deeper joy and even to aging well and longevity. In other words, friendship is inseparable from and indispensable to the good life that human beings yearn for. But, at the beginning of this New Year, more than 60% of Americans are experiencing chronic loneliness.ⁱ The General Surgeon of the

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United States Dr. Vivek Murthy describes this weakening of robust social connections in America as an “***epidemic of loneliness***”ⁱⁱⁱ that began long before the pandemic, but which has been exacerbated by the physical isolation the pandemic imposed on us all.ⁱⁱⁱ

As early as the 1970’s, our culture was already drilling into people’s minds this notion that a successful career, power, fame, social status, geographic mobility, prestige, money and lots of stuff are the markers of a good life. As people embraced the individualistic and atomized lifestyles that allowed them to succeed in a highly competitive and achievement-driven society, they got busier and time for family and friends became scarce. Americans have far fewer close friends today than their parents and grandparents did.^{iv} Technology, which proved to be crucial to keep us in contact with loved ones during the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021, has also chipped away at the quality of our relationships. Think about the amount of screen time we spend daily behind our computers or on our smartphones even when we are hanging out with family, relatives, neighbors or co-workers. Humanity is more digitally connected than ever before, but social media, texting, online meetings, video games and streaming services are crowding out of our lives the kinds of in-person interactions that can significantly decrease our sense of isolation and feeling of loneliness. There is an innate longing in every human being to search for friendship, to make friends, to be a friend, to find purposeful companionship among other human beings, to feel accepted by others, to nurture life-giving relationships and to share memorable and transformative life experiences with other people, but Arthur Brooks, a professor at the Harvard Business School and contributing writer at the Atlantic, believes that “***we are in the midst of a long-term crisis of habitual loneliness.***”^v

For most of the twentieth century, suburban congregations like ours bet on and built our programs, budgets and buildings around a cultural paradigm that appeared to assure us that we had church vitality and growth all figured out. Young families with children moved into town to get their kids into the school system and they were willing, we might say culturally conditioned, to add the worship service on Sunday morning to their weekly routine. Church was a place to meet other families, make friends, raise kids, equip the youth with a good Christian moral compass, gather to seek a relationship with God, ponder on the teachings of Christ, rejoice in baptisms, mourn the loss of loved ones, celebrate weddings, offer families new to town a place of belonging and volunteer to support the healing ministries and works of love of the congregation. It was not until very recently that churches woke up to the reality of a total paradigm shift that had been going on right outside our front doors and stained-glass windows. Not only fewer families have been stepping into church buildings, but the whole culture is reorienting away from the institutional church and organized religion. Americans had been slowly but steadily falling out of the habit of going to church before the pandemic and COVID-19 has only intensified this change of habit. A new survey released this month by the American Enterprise Institute and the University of Chicago revealed that upwards of 25% of the people who attended church services in-person before the pandemic have not returned to the pews and are not worshipping online at all.^{vi}

Arthur Brooks interprets this trend of decline in church attendance as another sign of the growing habitual loneliness that keeps increasing our collective sense of social isolation and unhappiness. In his column in the Atlantic, Brooks says that COVID-19 cut a groove of loneliness into our lives. We are socializing less for fun. We are choosing solitary activities over time with friends. We have stopped going to parties and, if we do go, our stay is usually much shorter. We are avoiding in-person interactions because we still see proximity to another person as a potential threat, especially if you are immunocompromised. We are giving up on the relationships and friendships that have the potential to enhance our well-being. We are “***stuck in a pattern of learned loneliness.***” Perhaps even more troublesome, after COVID, we may have “***simply forgotten how to be friends***”^{vii} and have the wrong goals in life. Rather than deepening our connections with other people in our lives, we may be succumbing to the cultural values that instigate us “***to love things because they measure our success, use people because they are instrumental for our success and worship ourselves because everything revolves around us.***”^{viii}

Loneliness may be a subjective feeling. Mental health professionals define it as the gap between the level of human connections that we long for in our lives and what we have. So, loneliness is not the same for everybody. Studies show that college students who live on campus and in dorms with classmates and are constantly around other students frequently indicate that they feel very lonely most of the time.^{ix} But while the experience of loneliness is very unique and personal, the negative consequences of habitual loneliness for both the individual and the community are unambiguously clear. There is robust scientific evidence that persisting loneliness increases the risk of anxiety, depression, and substance abuse and it is linked to hypertension, fewer antibodies to fight infections, and early mortality. Habitual loneliness also weakens the very relationships that could be the remedy for social isolation by cutting people off from those shared spaces where the friendships that help us to live longer, happier and healthier lives are nurtured. This pattern of learned loneliness that we have accepted as the “new normal” perpetuates the feeling of disconnection from other people and organizations that give us a purpose and keep us hopeful and excited about what is going on in our lives and in the world. It’s no wonder that Dr. Robert Waldinger declared, “***Loneliness kills***”^x and Emily Dickinson, reflecting on loneliness, wrote, “***The Loneliness... the horror not to be surveyed.***”^{xi}

My grandfather used to say that it is much easier to learn a new habit than to unlearn an old one. I wonder if in this moment when America is struggling with the horror of this habitual loneliness, this ongoing epidemic of social isolation, this unprecedented decline of life in community, and this erosion of friendships the church can break away from our own old habit of waiting for young families to move into town and seek out our congregation and be as bold, brave, and imaginative as Jesus was in today’s Gospel lesson.

“***Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.***” This is all Jesus said to Peter, Andrew, James and John on the lakeshore. There is no formal introduction. Jesus does

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not explain in detail his vision or mission plan. There is no attempt to convince the fishermen to drop their nets and leap into a whole new way of life. There is only the simple and honest invitation that inspires an immediate, heartfelt, unflinching and life-changing decision to drop everything that was familiar, safe, and habitual to follow and become close friends of Jesus.

Evangelical Christians have traditionally read into these words of Jesus an instruction to get people into the pews, children in the Sunday school, kids in the youth group, volunteers on church committees and new members on the membership roll, but you've got to wonder if there was something else in Jesus' invitation that resonated more profoundly with some spiritual, social and political longing in the hearts and minds of those fishermen to make them want to participate in the totally new ministry of the young man from Nazareth.

Theologian Ched Myers pointed out in a reflection on the calling of the first disciples that when we hear Jesus' words in today's passage, we tend to overlook the cultural and religious context of the Galileans on the lakeshore. Unlike us, they were rooted in Jewish tradition and understood well the metaphor Jesus used in his invitation. Myers noted that no less than four prophets – Jeremiah, Amos, Ezekiel and Habakkuk – employed that same image of “*fishing for people*” to challenge the habitually unjust, abusive, exploitative, violent and destructive behavior of the “big fish” in the ruling classes of Israel and to call people back to God's community where the oppressed and the oppressor unlearn the old habits of division and learn to cooperate in making the world look a bit more like God's Kingdom.^{xii} In other words, the fishermen heard Jesus calling them to start changing the world into a place where rather than loving things and using people, humanity would get in the habit of using things and loving people. They felt the deep joy of being asked to turn their own lives toward God through real friendship with the people God loves. Peter, Andrew, James and John were moved to do something they never thought they would do, because Jesus had faith that they could turn their friendship with him into a force for good, into a salvific invitation to a good, joyful, and purposeful life.

Religious scholar and writer Diana Butler Bass has challenged churches that are emerging from the last two years of learned isolation and loneliness to stop thinking that being a “*friendly congregation*” will be enough to bring people back to the pews. In one of her recent meditations, Diana lamented that too many churches are thinking of the current decline in attendance as nothing more than an institutional problem when, in reality, this is the moment for the spiritual re-ordering of things. In a world adrift in loneliness, Diana suggests that we must keep reminding each other that we worship a God who hates aloneness and created us for life-giving and life-affirming friendships.

This is the right time for suburban churches like ours “***to move from being a 'friendly church' to being communities that practice friendship in meaningful and transformative ways.***”^{xiii} In these days of an epidemic of loneliness, what people are hungering for are not more church programs and services; our neighbors are waiting for an

invitation to a Christian community shaped by people who genuinely want to embrace other people as friends. The horror of habitual loneliness tells us that there is a real longing for spiritual and relational connections in the hearts of Americans. People are longing for friendships that can make them happier and healthier, and they also want friends who believe they can have a relationship with God that will empower them to break out of the habit of being lonely so they may be part of a church that is seeking to reorient people's lives away from things and loneliness toward other people.

Friends, it was at the table of the last supper that Jesus told his followers that he would call them his friends.^{xiv} Keep this in mind when you come to the table this morning. Remember that Christ gave his life for his friends and turned friendship into our sacred calling. Jesus knew that without friendship, we are left with bupkis. This is why he went out of his way to connect with the fishermen on the lakeshore instead of being a solitary preacher of God's love for humankind.

Our world is hurting with habitual loneliness. People are feeling more lonely, more disconnected, and more unhappy and they are thirsting for a good life. There are dozens of human beings out there today that are not interested in being invited to sit in a church pew, but who are craving for meaningful and life-saving human connections. They want real friendships that can infuse their lives with joy and purpose. And that's what the Church is all about. We gather to follow the One who calls us friends and invites us to practice habits of friendship. So, this morning, do not let empty pews, budget shortfalls, and vacant positions on church committees distract you from your commitment to follow Christ. Be a friend. Let your friendship be the source of other people's happier, healthier, and longer lives in this church and in our community. Make time for your friends in our congregation and let us inspire each other to be the church known in Acton for breaking the habits of loneliness and inviting people to learn again to be friends, to live well, to love their neighbors, and to use our friendship with Jesus Christ as a sacred catalyst for strengthening and deepening human connections that can make our community here in Acton, our State, our country and the world happier and healthier. That is the kind of church that people are looking for – a church with people committed to friendship. Amen.

ⁱ PBS in What Americans are feeling lonelier and its effects on our health, PBS News Weekend, 08 January 2023, [<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/why-americans-are-lonelier-and-its-effects-on-our-health>].

ⁱⁱ 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>].

ⁱⁱⁱ By John Leland in How Loneliness Is Damaging Our Health, The New York Times, Digital Edition, 20 April 2022, [<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/20/nyregion/loneliness-epidemic.html>].

^{iv} By Martin Armstrong in Friendship: Less is more now, Global Health, World Economic Forum, 03 November 2022, [<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/11/friendships-less-is-now-more/>].

^v By Arthur C. Brooks in How We Learned to Be Lonely, The Atlantic, digital edition, 05 January 2023, [https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2023/01/loneliness-solitude-pandemic-habit/672631/?mc_cid=c39edd1daa&mc_eid=8ec4c47ea9].

^{vi} By Daniel Cox, Jennifer Benz, and Lindsey Witt-Swanson in Faith After the Pandemic: How COVID-19 Changed American Religion, American Enterprise Institute, 05 January 2023, [<https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/faith-after-the-pandemic-how-covid-19-changed-american-religion/#>].

^{vii} By Arthur C. Brooks in How We Learned to Be Lonely, The Atlantic, digital edition, 05 January 2023, [https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2023/01/loneliness-solitude-pandemic-habit/672631/?mc_cid=c39edd1daa&mc_eid=8ec4c47ea9].

^{viii} By Arthur C. Brooks in A New Formula for Happiness, How to Build a Happy Life, The Atlantic podcast, aired on 14 November 2022.

^{ix} PBS in What Americans are feeling lonelier and its effects on our health, PBS News Weekend, 08 January 2023, [<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/why-americans-are-lonelier-and-its-effects-on-our-health>].

^x By Liz Mineo in Good genes are nice, but joy is better, Health & Medicine, The Harvard Gazette, 11 April 2017 [<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2017/04/over-nearly-80-years-harvard-study-has-been-showing-how-to-live-a-healthy-and-happy-life/>].

^{xi} Emily Dickinson in The Loneliness One Dare not Sound, The Complete Poems by Emily Dickinson, p. 777.

^{xii} By Ched Myers in “Let’s Catch Some Big Fish!” Jesus’ Call to Discipleship in a World of Injustice, Third Sunday in Epiphany (Mark 1:14-20), Radical Discipleship, 22 January 2015, [<https://radicaldiscipleship.net/2015/01/22/lets-catch-some-big-fish-jesus-call-to-discipleship-in-a-world-of-injustice/>].

^{xiii} By Diana Butler Bass in Sunday Musings, The Cottage, 08 January 2023, [https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/sunday-musings-0b0?fbclid=IwAR2iIb1pWkzq7pSXKytLZmkpEihsKijfS92FCKWiDU63m6sCKDYXaB_cqJ0].

^{xiv} John 15:15.