

## ALL THE LONELY PEOPLE

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Jesus said, “*Abide in me as I abide in you ... I am the vine, you are the branches ... abide in me.*” (from John 15:4-5)

It’s been 52 years now since the Beatles released a record album they called Revolver. One of the songs on Revolver encouraged us to *look at all the lonely people*. It introduced us to a woman named Eleanor Rigby and a priest named Father McKenzie. Do you know the song? Have you heard of Eleanor Rigby? She volunteers at her church, where we see her picking up the rice after someone else’s wedding – always someone else’s wedding. Of her own wedding day she can only dream. She *waits at the window wearing the face that she keeps in a jar by the door*. At least she’s trying and hoping. But no bridegroom will ever come calling for Eleanor Rigby. As the song goes, she *died in the church and was buried along with her name*. To her funeral, *nobody came*. Eleanor Rigby is a picture of loneliness.

Father McKenzie is another picture of loneliness that the Beatles sketched for us in the same song. Father McKenzie is the priest at Eleanor Rigby’s church. He is an isolated man, one to whom *no-one comes near*. The Beatles sing of three brief, but telling scenes in his lonely life. In the first, he’s *writing the words of a sermon that no-one will hear*. In the second, he’s *darning his socks in the night when there’s nobody there*. In the third he’s burying Eleanor Rigby, *wiping the dirt from his hands as he walks from the grave*. The clear implication is that these two lives, even though lived in close proximity to each other, never connected, never touched, never related. No one is saved from loneliness, according to the song. *Ah, look at all the lonely people*, plays the refrain.

Today’s Scripture readings all speak of our fundamental human need to be in relationship with others. No matter how old we grow, I don’t think our inborn need to attach ourselves to the lives of others ever completely disappears. To be sure, one’s social capacity can be neglected, damaged, and abused, causing some to turn reclusive and bitter, and to isolate themselves from society. But seldom does the hunger for relationship ever go away. Being in community, being in fellowship is to take one step out of ourselves towards transcendence. Transcendence, perhaps our deepest yearning, is to know and experience an abiding connection to something or someone greater than ourselves. When the connections with family members, friends, business colleagues, mentors, and the Spirit of God are good, we thrive. When the connections are bad, all of life can be an uphill struggle, and our souls and bodies cry out for the living God.

In today’s reading from the Gospel of John (15:1-8), Jesus speaks to all the lonely people, and claims that the connection we most definitely want to make is with him, because he, in turn, connects us with God. To press the point he drew upon imagery that would have been readily accessible to his hearers: that of a vine and its branches. “*I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower ... Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches.*”

The imagery of a vine and its grapes was deeply rooted in Jewish symbolism, but it was also common to other cultures and religions of the time. The vine produced grapes, from the grapes came wine, and wine suggested abundance and blessing. When Jesus said, “*I am the true vine*,” what he meant to convey was that God, the great I AM, had planted himself in the earth. The Eucharistic overtones of the imagery and the words of Jesus should be obvious. The vine pours its life and energy into the branches, and eventually the grapes. From the fruit of the vine comes the sacrament of Christ’s blood in the Communion we share. The wine makes us one body with Christ, so that he may dwell in us and we in him. In the Eucharist we celebrate and make the

ultimate connection. Indeed, connection with God through Jesus Christ is why we're here in person on Sundays. You can't get it online.

So the great promise and possibility that Jesus holds out to us is connection with God. It is participation in the life of God. It is an invitation out of our isolation and loneliness. It's no secret, however, that the Beatles' song remains true: *Ah, look at all the lonely people*. Earlier this year I was curious to read that the British government has appointed a "Minister of Loneliness" to address what Theresa May, the Prime Minister, calls "the sad reality of modern life." In one survey, over 200,000 elderly citizens of the UK reported not having had a conversation with a friend or relative for weeks. Loneliness is hardly unique to England. The American Psychological Association reports that in this country, 40-percent of people over age 45 admit to chronic loneliness.<sup>1</sup> We seem to live increasingly isolated lives, even amidst the dense population of New York City. It's just easier or safer to retreat into a screen than it is to engage with a real, live person. Not long ago I was having lunch with a parishioner at a neighborhood restaurant. At the table next to us was a family of four who stared at their smart phones the entire time and never once spoke a word to each other. Yes, they were lost in a transcendent moment with something larger than themselves. But it was the internet – virtual reality – chosen at the expense of reality in the people at the same table. *Ah, look at all the lonely people*.

Look at the man we meet in today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles (8:26-40). Like Eleanor Rigby and Father McKenzie, he is a picture of loneliness. What do we know about him? We know that he was an Ethiopian eunuch who was traveling by chariot between Jerusalem and Gaza. We know that he was high-ranking official in the Queen of Ethiopia's court, in charge of her entire treasury. We know that he worshipped the God of Israel, even though he was probably a Gentile. Somehow he'd been drawn to the Jewish faith, enough so that he made a pilgrimage to the Temple and studied the Hebrew Scriptures. So here we have a man with access to great wealth and powerful people. He was worshipping the God of Israel. Why would we say that he was among the lonely people of his day?

Allow me to point out the obvious. First, he was traveling alone. Second, he wasn't just alone, he was alone on a desert road. Third, and perhaps most importantly, he was a eunuch. Sorry to be blunt here, but the likely scenario is that many years earlier the man had been captured as a prisoner of war and, without anesthetic, subjected to the horrifying procedure of castration. Why? In ancient times victorious armies had a dual purpose for making eunuchs out of their vanquished: to disgrace them, but also to make trustworthy slaves of them. Whom could you count on to watch but not woo your harem? Whom could you trust to preside over your treasury and be immune to the sexual favors of those who sought access to the kingdom's coffers? You could trust a eunuch, that's who. In fact, some eunuchs came to occupy high positions of responsibility in the kingdoms surrounding Jerusalem.

But not among the Jews. The Book of Deuteronomy (23:1) made it clear that eunuchs were not to enter the assembly of the Lord. Furthermore, among a people who closely associated the blessing of God with the ability to produce heirs, to be a eunuch was truly to be cut off from the land of the living. My guess is that the Ethiopian eunuch didn't know these Temple restrictions until he arrived in Jerusalem and found himself to be excluded. Why would he have gone at all if he knew beforehand that he wouldn't be welcome? Perhaps the experience of being judged irreparable in God's eyes plunged him into a personal crisis and sent him on a desperate search through the Scriptures for some word of hope. He must have wondered: was God even knowable at all to one such as himself?

The man was reading from what we call the 53<sup>rd</sup> Chapter of Isaiah – the mysterious verses about the Suffering Servant: *like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away ... he was cut off out of the land of the living*. If you dare, try to imagine what the eunuch was thinking as he read about someone else led to the slaughter, being cut off from the land of the living, and

enduring public humiliation under a blade. It could be these words were connecting to the deepest, darkest places of his own personal pain.

It was just then when Spirit of the Lord appointed the Apostle Philip to serve as Minister of Loneliness to the Ethiopian man. The Spirit bid Philip to do more than merely look at the lonely person. Rather, he was to run up alongside the chariot and help the driver interpret the Scriptures he was reading. The scene is amusing if you imagine it literally: Philip running alongside the chariot, simultaneously conducting an impromptu Bible study as he tried to keep pace. Eventually, the eunuch invited Philip into the chariot and said, “*About whom, may I ask, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?*” I think that the “someone else” The Ethiopian was wondering about here was himself. He was in that thin place where the boundaries between himself, and the Word of God, and the living Christ were breaking down. With Philip’s help, it’s as if he remembered something he hadn’t yet known: his connection with God through Jesus. God was knowable to him through a Messiah who suffered as he did. The man asked to solemnize his newly remembered connection with Jesus by being baptized. Philip obliged, and the Ethiopian went on his way rejoicing. According to the early church father, Irenaeus, the Ethiopian himself then became a branch that bore much fruit by preaching the gospel among his own people. He became an evangelist to the Ethiopians.

What we see encapsulated in the passage from Acts is nothing short of the church’s mission: to be God’s Ministers of Loneliness. The church’s mission is as simple, and as complicated as what Philip did: listening to the Spirit, pulling up alongside people, and being with them in the deepest, darkest places of their own personal pain. It is to remind people, or open their eyes for the first time to the faith that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus. Neither death, nor life, nor persecution, nor famine, nor nakedness, nor peril, nor sword can isolate us from God. We are more than conquerors through Christ, who loves us. We are not alone. God is knowable. Today we taste and see how gracious the Lord is.

I read recently of a remarkable story about Helen Keller. Many of you will know that Helen Keller was born in 1880, healthy in every way until age 19-months, when a sudden, devastating illness left her completely blind and deaf. Even though isolated in a world without sound or sight, the child was able to make some progress in recognizing family members, but she had no language, nor any concept of it. It was not until Helen turned 7 when her family was able to find Anne Sullivan, the woman who would connect with the girl. By spelling out words on the palm of Helen’s hand, Sullivan was able to teach her that every object had a name. Once Helen grasped the concept she became a voracious learner, and Sullivan would be her lifelong guide and mentor.

At one point Sullivan determined that Keller should learn about God and Christianity. She turned to Phillips Brooks, the Rector of Trinity Church, Boston, and the greatest preacher of his day. With Sullivan acting as interpreter, the two began a conversation. Brooks told the young girl about God, and it is said that she replied, “Mr. Brooks, I always knew he was there, but until now I didn’t know his name.” When Brooks told her about Jesus, how God had come to us in him, and how Jesus died and rose again, Helen replied, “I knew there had to be somebody like that.”<sup>2</sup> What deeply moved Phillips Brooks was that God had already reached through the loneliness, and made his presence known. God was with her all the time. She was not alone.

*Ah, look at all the lonely people, sang the Beatles, 52 years ago. Where do they all belong, they asked? The answer is, they belong with God, and they belong to God. Jesus said, “Abide in me as I abide in you ... I am the vine, you are the branches ... abide in me.”*

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<sup>1</sup> *The U.K. Now Has a “Minister for Loneliness.” Here’s Why it Matters.* By Jason Daley, Smithsonian.com, January 19, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> The story is told in varying forms in numerous books and articles about Helen Keller’s faith.