"GOD AND OUR LONELINESS"

INTRODUCTION

The title of the sermon this morning is "God and Our Loneliness", and it brings to mind a story of a minister who met a man on the street who was carrying a bunch of flowers. It seems that the minister spoke to the man commenting on the beautiful flowers he was carrying. The man responded, looking down at the bunch of flowers in his hand, turning it this way and that, and saying to the minister:

"It's a funny thing, but I just had to buy those flowers. They were so beautiful. I just couldn't resist. I don't know how to arrange them however. I'll stick them in a jug... You see, I live alone now... lost my wife about six months ago... she knew how to arrange flowers. It was wonderful what she could do with them...."

And the man passed on down the street carrying his flowers upside down, as men do, rather self-consciously. Late that night, the pastor saw a light in the man's apartment. He thought of the man sitting up there alone... of the flowers unarranged... stuck in a jug. And then he thought of all the lonely people in the city... some bereaved, some exiled, some away from home for the first time, some friendless, some deserted by a husband or a wife.

DEVELOPMENT

You and I may be among the highly privileged who have rarely, if ever, experienced the depths of human loneliness. But all of us know of men and women, boys and girls, who have entered into the terror of loneliness and experienced its sadness.

Loneliness may be caused, as you know, by many factors. The man with the flowers knew the loneliness of bereavement as some of you have probably known it. Death makes an emptiness against the sky. Children may experience loneliness, too. Children may know the anguish of not being loved, not being wanted, of not having the security and affection of a normal home life. Some people feel lonely because they are unattractive physically or personally. And then too there is the cruel form of loneliness that is a result of man's inhumanity to man. Think of Negro children or adult Negroes rejected and excluded, never made to feel at home, never having the opportunity to make the most of themselves because of the white man's fear and hostility. I remember a young Jewish man who experienced great loneliness his first semester in college because he was never "one of the boys" so to speak, because he was always given the cold shoulder. And how cruel it was. Of course, when any person is a stranger he runs the risk of being lonely, of people not reaching how to him. And this is why he should never treat a stranger - white or colored - as a second rate human being. A four year old boy gives us a clue as to how we should treat a stranger. It seems that his parents took him to a restaurant for the first time. And after the waiter had taken the orders of his parents, he turned to the four year old boy and said: "And now young man, what would you like to order?" The boy was so taken back that he turned to his mother and exclaimed: "Mother, this man thinks I'M a real human being". We ought always to treat others as "real" human beings.
One of the delightful characters in Boston University's School of Theology was Professor Pat McConnell. I remember how he once told us in the classroom how he had been the victim throughout his entire professional career of what he called "the double handshake". Pat McConnell was the Professor of rural church sociology. And whenever he was introduced to a stranger, it usually went this way. "This is Pat McConnell, the Professor of Rural Church Sociology at Boston University School of Theology". "On that" said Pat McConnell, "I would get a nice polite handshake. But then when the mediator would go on and say, 'Mr. McConnell is the brother of Bishop Francis McConnell' I would get another much more forceful and enthusiastic handshake. All my life I have been the victim of the double handshake." To be treated as a second rate human being not only bruises our egos, but it also offends elemental human dignity and justice and sharpens loneliness.

Of course, as men and women grow older they experience more and more loneliness. They find it more difficult to make new friends. They see their old friends slip away one by one. I think many of the responses of elderly people which often irritate and sadden those they love should be understood in this context.

There is the loneliness, too, that comes from moral failure. Moral failure of one kind or another can be almost as painful as solitary confinement. Good people turn from us; respectable citizens reject us.

T. S. Eliot in the play, "The Cocktail Party" recognizes that there is a loneliness which is part of the human situation, part of the price we pay for growing up, for being free and responsible, for making choices. Celia says:

"No, it isn't that I want to be alone, but that everyone's alone...or so it seems to me. They make noises, and think they're talking to each other; they make faces and think they understand each other. And I'm sure they don't."

So much for our brief anatomy of loneliness. Suppose we consider now some of the cures for loneliness.

PRACTICAL WISDOM

First, there is the practical wisdom in the suggestions offered by psychologists, social workers, and other helpful counsellors. Some time ago I collected some hints as to what to do when you are lonely. Among the ways suggested to combat lonely moods, these have merit:

"Tonight: Make plans to see three people you have known and liked and with whom you have temporarily lost contact. Sit down and make an inventory of your interests as the first step toward finding a hobby to pursue. Make a list of all the people you know who are lonely and resolve to ask each one of them to do something with you in the next month. This week: Write three letters to three
old friends you have neglected. Make your letters light, not too long and not too frequent. Resolve to do one good turn at least each day. It will make you feel better, more useful. Maybe some harassed young mother would welcome a baby sitter one evening a week, for example. For the future: Be on the lookout for new places to go, new things to do...always have something to look forward to...don't expect too much too soon. Remember to deal with your loneliness a bit at a time. Find ways of getting through an hour of it, a day, a week, and it may be gone by then...."

Sound advice in these suggestions offered to us by Dorothy San
gster. However, I think we can go beyond this and find something deeper or even more meaningful as a cure for our loneliness.

JESUS AND LONELINESS  

Think, for a moment, if you will, of the loneliness that our Lord must have encountered and experienced in his life. Rejected by his family as one who was emotionally disturbed; condemned by his church leaders as a blasphemer and heretic; branded as a traitor by many of his fellow citizens. The people feeling he had built melted away when the crowds realized that he did not fit the mold of their prejudices. Misunderstood by his own friends and students, he knew the agony of feeling all alone. And yet he managed to remain steady because of his faith in God. Remember his words: "He who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone..." And with realism did he see that he would be left alone: "The hour is coming" he said, "Indeed, it has come, when you will be scattered, every man to his home, and you will leave me alone; yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me".

This brings us then to the sovereign cure of loneliness: to believe that God is always with us; that his love overcomes our separateness, and yet permits us to be ourselves. Jesus was demonstrating to us the truth that no man who trusts in God, who practices faithfully his companionship, who gives himself away to others - is ever forsaken by God. God can change our desolate loneliness to creative loneliness because with God our aloneness is shared. To open our hearts to God is to receive love and the power to love others and be loved. Centuries before Christ, a devout poet turned to the great God whom he knew to be the source of all life and somehow the responsive companion of our human spirits and prayed:

"Turn thou to me, and be gracious to me; for I am lonely and afflicted....."

Ancient as it is, it is also new as this moment. Says a present day philosopher: "Our very life can be lived under the knowledge that every major threat to our being, to our abundant life, is overcome in God."
This assurance is illustrated in a story told by Dr. Charles Allen about the president of a certain company who had a large number of people working under him. This able executive was considered efficient almost to the point of ruthlessness. His working philosophy included the belief that no one person was indispensable. He could always get a replacement for any employee who left the company. Gradually, however, he came to feel that one woman in his office was indispensable. He could not explain why. Her skills were good, but not exceptional. One day the executive asked this woman about herself and her view of life. She said, "One day changed my life". She told of hearing a sermon in which the minister said, "Why not try Christ's way for just one day?" The minister then explained that the average life spans about half a million hours. Surely one could afford to use at least 24 of those many hours in a noble experiment. This girl decided she would try it. She began that day with a quiet devotional reading of some words from her Bible and by saying a brief, simple prayer. She asked God to give her power to resist every black, mean, unworthy thought that day. She started to work that morning saying, "Just this one day I am going to try Christianity".

Whenever an unkind word almost reached her lips she would turn it back with a short prayer. When any fears came, quickly she would affirm her trust in God. When tempted to do less than her best, she would stop and ask herself, "Would the Lord approve? Would he act this way in my place?" She kept it up through the day. It wasn't a gloomy, impossible day, and that night she had a feeling of inner satisfaction - not with herself, but in a way she had not felt before. Naturally, she decided to try it a second day. It came to be her philosophy of life. Not every day was without its temptations to slip back into the old moods and ways, she said, but it became easier to go on. Then she said: "Imagine what it means never to be afraid of insecurity, of loss of position, not to be afraid of life or death, imagine what it means never to have ill will. I suddenly discovered that everything began to flow toward me rather than away from me. Amazing things happened. Life became good and everybody seemed to love me and want me around. Gradually I began to have a sense of well-being.

Everything began to flow toward her rather than away from her. This "one day" idea is worth trying. Why don't you try it. Experiment with it, and see if this is not the lasting cure to the loneliness of your life.

PRAYER: O Thou who bringest the lonely home, bring us to thyself by the road of trust, the way of prayer, the path of love. When we are lonely and low, turn our thoughts to our Lord, Jesus of Nazareth, who though despised and rejected of men kept loving them to the end and forever. Amen
FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY
July 14, 1963

ORDER OF WORSHIP
11 A.M.

ORGAN
"Cantabile" Vierne

CALL TO WORSHIP

HYMN NO. 4 "O worship the King, all glorious above"

PRAYER OF CONFESSION (Seated)

Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Maker of all things, Judge of all men; we acknowledge our manifold sins and wickedness, which we have committed by thought, word, and deed. We do earnestly repent, and are heartily sorry for these our misdoings. Have mercy upon us, most merciful Father; forgive us all that is past; and grant that we may ever hereafter serve and please Thee in newness of life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

SILENT MEDITATION - WORDS OF ASSURANCE - LORD'S PRAYER

RESPONSIVE READING
"The Path of Wisdom" Page 599

GLORIA PATRI

APOSTLES' CREED

Page 512

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SCRIPTURE
I Corinthians 13: 1 - 13

PASTORAL PRAYER

ANNOUNCEMENTS

OFFERTORY SOLO
"Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" Bach (Dr. Charles Kim, Tenor)

PRESENTATION OF THE OFFERING WITH THE DOXOLOGY

HYMN NO. 180 "Breathe on me, Breath of God"

SERMON
"GOD AND OUR LONELINESS" Mr. Clarke

HYMN NO. 242 "He leadeth me: O blessed thought!"

BENEDICTION

ORGAN
"Fugue in G Minor" Dupre

***Interval for ushering

A WELCOME

We give a hearty welcome to friends old or new who may be a part of our congregation this morning. For the summer Sundays, the Coffee Hour which gave such a splendid opportunity for fellowship has been discontinued, but our handshake is just as real as if it were given with a coffee or tea cup in hand. If you are an "old faithful" it warms our hearts to see you again. If this is your first visit to our church, this note but acknowledges that we trust it will not be your last.

NURSERY AND KINDERGARTEN AT ELEVEN

Sessions for pre-school children are held on the fourth floor each Sunday morning during the summer from eleven to twelve-fifteen. The mothers and helpers involved in today's program are Mrs. Hull, Miss Jensen, and Mrs. Levy.

SPOTLIGHT ON SUMMER STOCK IN THE TIME EXCHANGE

Our own church building needs touch up painting in various areas this summer. Any man (or woman) who can wield a paintbrush and has even a few day-time hours free need only to call the Church Office. We will supply the paint and equipment. Results: time shares in our Time Exchange, new sparkle in our church, and a saving for our church's maintenance budget.

YOUNG ADULTS IN THE CONGREGATION

Young Adult visitors are invited to meet the Young Adults of this church following the service to go together to a nearby restaurant for a "Dutch Treat" dinner. The group assembles in front of the church immediately following the service.
PARK AVENUE
METHODIST CHURCH

106 East 86th Street
New York 28, N.Y.
AT 9-6997

CHURCH DIRECTORY
Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke .................. Minister
Dr. Harold C. Metzner ........... Associate Minister, Emeritus
Mr. Mark A. Else ............ Choir Director
Mr. J. Earl Weatherford ........ Organist
Mrs. George Leech ........... Day School Director
Mrs. Richard Morley .......... Church Secretary

GENERAL OFFICES
Lay Member, Annual Conference ......... Mr. Paul R. Russell
Lay Leader, The Church ................ Mr. Mark A. Else
President, Trustees .................. Mr. Paul R. Russell
President, Woman's Society .......... Miss Allene Ford
President, Young Adults ............. (To be filled)
President, Choir .................... Dr. Charles W. Kim
Education Commission Chairman .... Miss Marion Hosmer
Finance Commission Chairman .... Mr. Glenn Lowry
Membership Commission Chairman .. (To be filled)
Missions Commission Chairman .... Dr. Harold N. Brewster
Social Concerns Commission Chr .... Mrs. James McDonald

STATED MEETINGS
Sunday Services: 10:00 a.m. ............... Sunday School
11:00 a.m. .................. Morning Worship
12:00 noon .......... Fellowship Hour
7:00 p.m. ........................ Young Adults
(2nd and 4th Sundays)
Official Board ....................... First Tuesday, 8:15 p.m.
Woman's Society .................... Second Monday, 8:00 p.m.
Choir Rehearsal ............. Every Wednesday, 7:00 p.m.
Day School .................. Every morning (9 - 12)