

# Knowing Me, Knowing You: Loneliness & Connection - 22nd May 2022

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[ 0 : 00 ] All right, we're back with another dip into this series we've been doing called Knowing Me, Knowing You. There is nothing we can do, I know, yes, better or worse.

It's the name we've given to this Sunday series that we've been doing in recent weeks, in which we're exploring what it means to hopefully know ourselves, know each other, and know God just a bit better as we journey through life.

This awareness, this growth, it's a lifelong, even eternal quest, I guess. But whilst we're not going to smash it completely on a Sunday series, I know, the hope is that these Sundays might just give us enough food for thought, enough fuel for the journey, as we go a little bit deeper in knowing how we tick, in knowing how each other tick, and perhaps most of all in knowing what makes God tick and how that relates to us.

Now, as one aspect, though, of understanding how we tick in relation to others and to God, it'd be good today to look at the topic of loneliness and connection.

Yeah, I appreciate loneliness might seem like a pretty depressing subject for a Sunday morning. I do understand that. But my hope is that as we unpack it, and perhaps most of all as we look to the person of Jesus to give us a steer on things, we'll be better equipped by God to help ourselves and maybe help each other as we find a way through it.

[ 1 : 32 ] And I think there is a need for many of us to find our way through this area of loneliness, because loneliness, it's sadly a pretty common experience for so many of us these days.

And yet, according to the Mental Health Foundation, one in four adults feels lonely, some or even all of the time. One in four.

That's a huge number of people. Which means statistically, that's likely to be the case for a good number of us in the room today. Maybe for you, maybe you identify with that phrase.

The same Mental Health Foundation findings also reveal that whilst one in four people feel lonely, some or all of the time, they also conclude that one in five people will hide their loneliness in front of others.

Again, maybe that's something which feels familiar to you. Now, what does it mean to feel lonely? Well, I guess that the classic picture is of someone being alone or isolated.

[ 2 : 43 ] You know, the kind of kid sitting on their lonesome with no one to play with in the playground. And in many ways, the classic kind of dictionary definition of loneliness supports this picture, because it defines loneliness as this, a sense of sadness because someone has no friends or company.

Now, if we go by that definition, then I guess that maybe helps explain why people might choose to hide whatever loneliness they're feeling from others, because it feels embarrassing, to be honest.

I mean, it hurts us to think that we are defined by this kind of definition of loneliness, that we might have no friends or company. You know, in our digital age where connectivity is championed, I guess to admit to feeling lonely feels like an admission of failure, perhaps, on our part.

A sense of failure, which can cut to the heart of our own sense of self-esteem and self-worth. I guess at the bottom line, we assume that if we often feel alone or isolated, then there must be something wrong with us.

And yet, I want to push against that idea today, because I think there's more to loneliness than it simply being sad because we might lack friends or company, despite what this dictionary definition might suggest.

[ 4 : 11 ] Indeed, I'm not even sure that this definition is truly what loneliness is. You see, we can be perfectly content on our own.

That may not be healthy for extended periods of time. You know, lockdown perhaps has taught us that. But for many people, myself included, you know, a lack of company could often be very welcome.

Give me my cave any day, and I'm generally quite happy. You know, being alone doesn't always lead to feelings of loneliness. But the reverse is also true, because we can actually have all sorts of friends.

We can find ourselves in all sorts of company. We can be lively on social media. We can live with people. We can have a partner or a family. We can belong to a church, and yet still feel incredibly lonely, even if we did say, actually, I've got lots of friends, and I've got lots of company.

So how can this be? How can we work this out? Well, to help us think this one through, I'm going to turn to one of the world's leading experts on understanding loneliness, and he's an American physician called Dr. Vivek Murthy, who is also the Surgeon General of the United States.

[ 5 : 36 ] He's kind of the American equivalent of Chris Whitty, I guess. You know, someone at the top of his game for public health. And what's interesting is that the way that he defines loneliness is not about assuming someone has no friends or company, nor is it assuming that they can't possibly be lonely if they do have lots of friends and family and company around them.

But instead, for Dr. Murthy, he says loneliness is not about a quantity of people in our lives. Rather, loneliness is contingent on the quality of the company, the quality of the relationships we have. And so he defines loneliness as being this, the gap between the connections we need and the connections we have. I'll say that again.

It's the gap between the connections we need and the connections we have. And according to Dr. Murthy, this loneliness gap, if we can call it that, tends to take one of three forms.

So firstly, he says there's what we might call emotional loneliness. The lack of a close confidant, maybe. A soul friend. Could be an intimate partner.

[ 6 : 58 ] Someone with whom you share a deep mutual bond of connection and trust. So there's emotional loneliness, that closeness there. Secondly, though, he says there's another level, which is relational loneliness.

And that can be when there's a yearning for quality social companionship and support. Genuine friends, in other words.

And then thirdly, there's another dimension of loneliness, what he calls collective loneliness. The hunger for a network, a tribe, a community with whom we share a sense of purpose and interest. So three forms of loneliness. And when taken together, it's reckoned that these three dimensions of the emotional side, the relational side, and the collective side, taken together, Dr. Murthy reckons, they make up the full range of social connections which we as humans need.

And if we got all three, if we have all three, then there's a kind of sweet spot in the middle where we're able to thrive and be the people we would long to be.

[ 8 : 19 ] But equally, if we lack any of these three dimensions, the emotional, the relational, or the collective, often through no fault of our own or any failings of our own, that disconnect, that lack, it's that which can leave us feeling lonely.

So, for example, whilst we may be well-connected collectively, perhaps in some sort of community or other, and maybe emotionally we enjoy, say, living with a partner, we can still feel lonely for friendships in a relational sense.

Or even if we have lots of friends and are part of all sorts of community clubs and organizations and we're nice and busy and so on, we can still feel lonely for that intimate emotional connection with someone who we might call a soul friend, maybe a parent, maybe a partner.

Does that kind of make sense? Three dimensions. And if we're lacking any one of them, that can lead to us feeling lonely. And so I wonder for you, as you look at that framework there, I wonder what you see of your own experience over the years in that image.

Maybe you've got all three dimensions at the moment as well cracked and you're well and truly firing on all cylinders. If that's the case, fantastic. And long may you thrive, as it says, in the middle there.

[ 9 : 47 ] But if it's true, on the other hand, that one in four of us are lonely, some or even all of the time, I suspect many of us might be able to identify one or more of those three areas as triggering

either an occasional or an ongoing sense of loneliness.

I think for me, as I look at myself in relation to that image there, I'm fortunate. I'm married to Gemma, someone with whom I'm able to share a close emotional bond of love and trust. We've got immediate family around as well. I'm fortunate as well that I feel connected to various collectives with whom I share a sense of belonging and purpose.

And most importantly, this church community, you, us. And I love being part of this community. There's also the Vic, Dana Road, which I know I mention it a lot, but that's an important little community for me.

I love feeling I belong in there. I feel connected to Burntwood as a town, as a whole, not from around these parts, but this is my home and we love living here. And then there's also more kind of distant, occasional places perhaps.

[10:59] So Greenbelt Festival, which some of you may have heard of, once a year or so, go there. There's a kind of tribe there of like-minded people who I find an affinity with. West Ham as well.

I know, I'm serious. You feel that kind of affinity with a sporting team. Whoever you follow, you get that kind of bond with that as well. So I feel part of various collectives at different levels.

But the dimension I sometimes struggle with is the relational one. That's why I put it more faded up there. You know, those social, genuine friendships.

relationships. And it's a weird thing to be talking about in a room full of people when I do count so many of you as friends. But I think for me, if I'm honest, having this role of being vicar of this community, there is a cost to that which makes it hard to switch off from having or being seen as having that role and the responsibility perhaps that comes with it.

So when I go down to Vic to relax, most people in there that know me as Matt, you get a couple of people every time I walk in, oh, the vicar's in, watch your language. And it's like, ah, come on, let me be me.

[12:15] Don't label me like that. And I struggle sometimes to know how to do it. And I know I've got a very strange job. I know it's a very strange job. Believe me, it's a very strange job. But it does mean I know I'm not always very good at working out or navigating how to do friendships, particularly locally, alongside it.

So that's me. It's the relational that I'm working out, I guess. What about you? What about you of these things? Or what do you reckon about the person next to you?

What do you think they might struggle with in this? Now don't worry, I'm not going to ask us to share on this this morning. It's far too tender a topic for us to speak about perhaps out loud at this point.

But I think in our quest to know ourselves and to know each other better, I'd suggest this loneliness framework is quite a helpful one for us to put ourselves into.

It's quite a helpful model perhaps to reflect on where we fit into it. That's for ourselves and for each other maybe. But how might we get to know God better through our understanding of these dimensions of loneliness?

[13:33] And in terms of God's loving kindness to us, how might God be wanting to work in our lives to help combat whatever loneliness we do experience?

Well I think as we've all kind of divine human questions, we can do no better than turn to the person to the person of Jesus because as we look through the gospel accounts of his life, I think we can see in Jesus not only someone who understands and invests in each of these three different kinds of relationship, but who in turn then offers us a model to follow for ways to combat whatever loneliness we might experience in our lives.

So first up, how does Jesus do in dealing with the potential in his life for emotional loneliness? Well I know as far as we know Jesus never got married, neither did he have any exclusive romantic relationships, there is plenty of evidence for him having an incredibly close connection with a select, with a small number of people.

So for example, there are times in the gospel stories when Jesus makes a deliberate point of singling out Peter, James and John to spend time with. Now most significantly perhaps by hiking up a mountain with them before his appearance was transfigured and the glory of God literally kind of shone out of him.

But there's also time in the garden of Gethsemane on the night before he died when Jesus gathered the same three blokes, Peter, James and John to pray and keep watch with him.

[ 15 : 14 ] It's interesting I think that in inviting this inner circle, these three guys with him to both things like his transfiguration when he's on top of a mountain, things like the garden of Gethsemane when he's right down in the depths.

These three witnessed Jesus if you like at his most glorious but also his most vulnerable. And it seems therefore Jesus understands the importance the importance of sharing all that we're about with those who we might count as our closest people, our soul friends if you like, those we have the deepest connections with.

You know, the fact that Jesus was single and the fact that he doesn't seem to have had the closest of relationships with his immediate family, let's put it mildly because they thought at one point he was mad, he was mad.

That's not the kind of family that I would particularly want to spend much time with really. But Jesus was single, his family were, we'll see. I think that should encourage us to see that deep connections are possible, even desirable outside of exclusive relationships and perhaps outside of family units. What's more, the other people who Jesus seems to have particularly close connections with, people like Lazarus and Mary and Martha, people like Mary Magdalene, you know, none of them fit the expected mould for who Jesus would bond most closely with, but bond with each of them, he certainly does.

[ 16 : 53 ] Now, I don't know why Jesus settled on these particular people to have his most intimate connections with. They're a right old mixed bag of folks if you think about it. I mean, there's Peter, this gruff fisherman who denied even knowing Jesus.

You've got Mary Magdalene who had seven demons cast out of her and you've got Lazarus who died. But it does seem to me that if we are experiencing emotional loneliness because of a lack of close connections, where it may just be that God is encouraging us to look beyond the obvious perhaps and be open to finding connections with people who we wouldn't necessarily expect to gel with, whether that's the equivalent of Peter or Mary Magdalene or Lazarus or whoever.

What else? Well, in terms of finding ways to combat the potential for relational loneliness, the friendship side of things, I think it's clear from the Gospels that Jesus went out of his way to invest in friendships and companionship.

Most have always spent time with those that we know as the twelve disciples, twelve men he intentionally called his friends. So how does his friendship form between Jesus and them?

Well, Jesus comes on the scene at sort of age thirty after he's had his childhood kind of stories in the Gospel. What was he doing in his teens and his twenties? We don't know, but it would seem that some of the disciples he perhaps grew up with in his teens and twenties and knew them already.

[ 18 : 29 ] So he got fishermen like Peter, Andrew, James, and John. They lived just down the road in a village called Beth Sider, which was just down the road from where Jesus settled in a town called Capernaum. So it's likely that Jesus already knew some of the disciples before he called them to join his collective.

Others, we had an affinity with. He kind of picked them out, it seems. Saw their potential, if you like. So you've got people like Matthew, the tax collector. We're told that Jesus stopped and saw him sitting in his tax collector's booth.

When Jesus sees you, you know there's something going on. Same with another guy called Nathaniel. We don't know much about Nathaniel. He's a very quiet kind of chap. But we're told that Jesus notices him sitting under a fig tree.

And when Jesus says, I've seen you, Nathaniel says, yeah, I want to follow you because you've seen me in that sense. God some of these 12 disciples, they're far from obvious candidates for Jesus to be friends with.

Again, a lesson perhaps for us about befriending unexpected people. But the friendships were fostered above all by them simply but intentionally spending time with each other.

[ 19 : 43 ] They walk everywhere. They weren't on their individual scooters or bikes. They had to walk everywhere together. And by walking together, they talked together, they ate together, they drank together, they debated, they joked, they shared, they did life together.

And it strikes me that if Jesus knew that in order to not allow himself to be relationally lonely, he needed to put intentional time into sharing his life with others, how much more do we need to do that or would we do well to follow his example?

I get it in modern life that so many of us are busy and we're tired and I know how hard it is sometimes to get off the sofa and even this morning to walk through these doors for some of us, especially if there's anxiety or depression going on in our lives.

And if that's you, if it's been a struggle to get here and you nearly didn't, then well done for making it this morning. I know that's a step. But I do wonder if for others of us, if the prayers we perhaps sometimes secretly pray asking for God to give us good friendships, I do wonder if they're more likely to be answered when we make an intentional priority of simply turning up to things even if we don't always feel like it.

I know for me is that the pandemic subsided, you know, we had a couple of years of not necessarily mixing socially and stuff and I think when that all wound down a little bit I made a kind of decision I suppose, I was going to say yes to more social things, life's passing by and I thought I'm going to say yes to things, not like in a Jim Carrey yes man kind of way but just like I want to be intentional about joining in with stuff and that's not always easy for me, I'm an introvert, like I sail up my cave, there's part of me that likes box sets and sofas and things and I've got some down time, I'm not always the most socially hungry of people I suppose in that sense, so I don't always find saying yes to social things easy but I made that pledge to myself almost to say yes because I know as I said this dimension of loneliness in a relational sense is key for me and I need to help God to help me by actually getting out and meeting with people and maybe that's something which resonates with you too and if so there are various things that are on here as church services and socials and groups and stuff coming up that you may want to make a priority of even if you don't always feel like it and the offer's there anyway but then thirdly and finally in terms of these dimensions I think we see Jesus also combating the potential for him to experience collective loneliness by him being an active part of a vibrant community and perhaps the best example of this is in Luke's gospel when we read that

[ 22 : 40 ] Jesus sent out 72 of his followers to go and share the good news of his love with the surrounding towns and villages sending out that's okay you haven't really got to be in a community to send people out but the best bit of the story I find is that when these 72 people return with the stories of all that God had done through them we see a kind of ecstatic Jesus we're told he's full of the joy of the Holy Spirit he celebrates the community to which he belongs and the way in which God brings life through it so wherever we find our relational community whether that's church or pub or football or whatever it is and our hopes and John's is or could be part of that community life for each of us I think we see in Jesus someone who understands not just the way in which community life combats relational loneliness but is at the same time a real source of joy and encouragement for us in our own faith journey through life and I think I find it fascinating that in mixing in different circles so you've got circles of three people Peter

James and John Mary Martha Lazarus and so on he mixes in circles of 12 people the 12 disciples but then he's also got this circle of 70 odd people this kind of wider community of faith to which he belonged Jesus evidently found three ways of combating the three potentials for loneliness we could say it's a three a 12 and a 72 that seems to be Jesus pattern for connecting with people three circles three dimensions of relationship which I'd say Jesus offers to us as a model for how we too might combat the loneliness which might otherwise impact or shape our lives so if we think about that for us just want to draw it together really with another quote from this guy Dr. Vivek Murthy and he says that in his experience it's this that the best antidote to loneliness is human connection because the opposite of loneliness loneliness is love it seems to me that as we follow Jesus example by seeking to lovingly connect with one another in this multi-dimensional way we'll not only be combating the potential for loneliness and we'll not only be deepening the connections that we can make with each other but we'll also be deepening our connection and awareness of God says in the first letter of John says this whoever lives in love lives in God and God lives in them it's my prayer that the ways we're able to connect emotionally and relationally and collectively might reflect the love of God as shown through Jesus both now and always

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