

John 17:20-21 “Loneliness Isn’t the End”

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- [0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama.! Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.
- ! I need God just as much as you do. So let's talk about this together.
- So it's summertime right now, correct? And you may have felt that outside. It's the dog days of summer. Now for me, when I look at summertime, I think of movies.
- And my first job ever was in a movie theater. And my second job was at a rental, a movie rental place. A lot of y'all don't know what that is, kids. We used to have to go rent movies physically.
- And it was really fun. But there were always these blockbuster movies. And I remember waiting for Batman to come out when I was working at the theater. And I got to get the poster. And I still have the poster at my house.
- [1 : 17] And it was wonderful. Like that anticipation of the next big movie. And this summer, we've had Jurassic Park. Spoiler alert, it could have been 30 minutes.
- So maybe watch that one on Netflix. I saw Superman. I really enjoyed Superman. And recently I watched, it was one of those rent at home, but it was still in the theater movies.
- Another superhero movie that I didn't know anything about. And it really caught me off guard. And it's about this group of misfits. And they're haunted by their dark pasts. And they're kind of the leftovers of the superheroes.
- The not-so-superheroes. And they're trying to figure out if they can make a difference at all in this world. Do anything more than make mistakes. And it was really great. And what surprised me about it was how it unexpectedly explored loneliness.
- And when speaking about loneliness, one of the main characters says, You can't stuff it down. You can't hold it in all alone.
- [2 : 22] No one can. We have to let it out. We have to spend time together. And even if it doesn't make the emptiness go away, I promise you, it will feel lighter.
- And then there's this chilling scene where one of the main characters is trapped by his own loneliness. And he has to fight himself to battle the loneliness. And the movie does this great job of showing the battle by turning them into two characters that are literally fighting with their fists, but also with their words.
- And it goes like this. He says, I was going to show everyone that I was more than something. You know, and they're fighting. Boom, boom. To which the loneliness responds.
- The most shameful thing of all is thinking that you could be anything more than nothing. You don't matter to anyone. And then for a moment, you see this glimmer of hope.
- And the character gets this gumption up to strike back. And he says, I'm stronger than you. To which the loneliness replies, let's see.
- [3 : 25] You thought you were going to be some great man, some savior. You can't even save yourself. We will always be alone.

You ever felt alone? Right now, connection is supposedly easier than ever before.

Because we are more digitally connected than any generation before us. But somehow, we are more divided, more suspicious of one another, more isolated, and more alone than ever before.

Recent studies have found that nearly half of U.S. adults say that they feel lonely. Among younger adults, nearly 30% feel lonely on a weekly basis.

In 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General declared loneliness a public health epidemic. Citing its health impact as equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

[4 : 28] One in five practicing Christians report feeling lonely every day and 10% constantly lonely. And among pastors, 65% admit to feeling lonely and isolated.

One time, I was in a spin class, the bike class. And the teacher decided to only play Taylor Swift songs for the entire hour or 45 minutes.

I was the only guy in the class. And I don't know if you've listened to Taylor Swift, but I don't think she likes dudes that much in her songs. So, I'll never forget three songs in.

And after the song ended, one of the girls looks at me. All I've been doing, mind you, is just riding a spin bike. She looks over at me after the song's over and goes, yeah, Derek! All of that angst channeled right at me because I was the only guy in the room.

And I felt alone. Very alone. Nowhere to go. Strapped to a spin bike. One time, though more serious, I wrongfully lost a job.

[5 : 42] I'd be up in the middle of the night. I couldn't sleep. Feeling sad. Feeling alone. Feeling like there's nobody that I could talk to. What do you do with your loneliness?

How do you deal with your loneliness? One of the common ways that people deal with their loneliness is through distractions. Like keeping busy and just not thinking about it.

As someone in our church once said to me, we spend money we don't have to buy things we don't need to impress people we don't like. Sometimes we scroll.

Sometimes we swipe and we search. And we're really longing to belong. And even inside the church, people sit next to each other right now. And they may feel very, very unknown.

Maybe that's you. Where do you feel lonely? Maybe it is that thought in the middle of the night. Is everything going to be okay? Or that weight of I just lost my job and feel like a failure.

[6 : 46] Or maybe you're angry and you feel alone in your anger. You're jealous of people that are happier than you. Maybe you've had a fight with your spouse and you feel alone in it. Maybe it's something good. Like you're starting something new in your life or career.

And you just feel alone and isolated. People can't understand. Or maybe you've lost a loved one. And you just feel lonely or that shame from doing something wrong.

And you don't feel like you can talk about it. So you just don't. And you just keep going. Alone. Superheroes feel it.

You and I feel it. Church feels it. And there's good news that it's into this world of loneliness and isolation that Jesus prays for something totally different.

Something better. Something complete. Not rooted in screens or likes or comments or failures or shame or isolation. But something rooted only in him.

[7 : 49] So it's right after the Last Supper. To give you context to where we're jumping in. It's right before Jesus goes to the Garden of Gethsemane. And then is arrested and taken to be crucified. And he knew what was coming.

And when you know that your life is about to be over. You think about the most important things. And here we get a glimpse of what Jesus is thinking about through the words in his prayer.

So I want you to imagine that you're there listening in. Now he's prayed right before this. He's going to pray after this. We're jumping in to a little piece of that. We're just listening to this piece of the prayer. What's he praying?

What's he thinking about? What's he praying for? Let's listen in. I do not ask for these only. But also for those who will believe in me through their word.

That they may all be one. Just as you, Father, are in me. And I in you. That they also may be in us. So that the world may believe that you have sent me.

[8 : 50] Now this is an excerpt of what's called the high priestly prayer. Jesus has been praying for his apostles. Who are going to bring the word all around the world.

He's been praying that he would be glorified with his father. With the glory that he had before the world was created. And now he's moved on to pray for who?

Who's he praying for here? I'll watch the clock. Anybody? Us. This prayer is for us.

Those who will believe through the words of those. The apostles. Okay. And that's us. We're here gathered today. We're reading this.

This is for us. So this prayer is pulling into a much bigger story. All right. And it's the origin story of union.

[9 : 47] Union. Okay. What does that mean when I say union? Union is this spiritual oneness that believers have with Jesus.

The resurrected Jesus. The glorified Jesus. With God. It's more than merely an association or like a friendship. Jesus is my friend. And I can talk to him.

There's this mysterious, inseparable connection that's beautiful. Because God is spirit. Okay. So there's this interconnectedness.

Union is a oneness that mirrors the union that God has with himself. You've heard of this referred to as the Holy Trinity. Okay. Where God is one.

God is three. Each of the persons is fully God. And each person is distinct from the others. And the three persons are eternally related to one another as father and son and Holy Spirit.

[10 : 44] And when you believe in Jesus, you are supernaturally joining the family of the Godhead. And becoming then spiritually knit together, not only with Jesus through the Holy Spirit, but also with each other.

That's where you get that phrase born again. Jesus comes into your heart and you're made new. New life. The old is gone. The new has come. And nothing can separate you from that spiritual oneness with him.

He's in you. You're in him. He's in the Father. The Father's in him. The Holy Spirit's in him. Everybody's together. Okay. And he dwells in you. This is why Galatians 2.20 says, I've been crucified with Christ and it's no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.

Right? The life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. So in the Trinity, there's always been this perfect union.

Okay? The Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, they delight in each other in perfect love, perfect glory. In the Garden of Eden, even, okay? God shared his space with humanity.

[12 : 00] Adam and Eve walked and talked with God in perfect fellowship and they were unashamed and they were not afraid and they were fully known and they were fully loved. But then something happened, right?

Sin entered the world. Union was shattered. Death entered through that sin and loneliness was not far behind. Adam and Eve then hid in shame.

They blamed one another. They covered themselves. Their connection with God and each other was broken. And ever since then, we've been living in the ache of that loss.

So God is the origin story of union. And Eden is the origin story of loneliness. And Jesus is praying for the complete reversal of that loss.

He's praying for a restoration that will happen through a oneness with him, leading to a oneness with one another. A connection that is not merely superficial, but it is supernatural.

[13 : 04] It's not just an association. It's something where you can be fully known and fully loved in all of your mistakes, still accepted and loved far greater than you could possibly imagine.

Because it's the love that God himself has with himself shared through his people to one another and to the world. Now, the Bible gives us examples of how this looks.

If you've read the book of Acts, you will see this. It's that believers started to share their possessions and see them as not their own. And they started to share their burdens and their failures.

And there was a connection that led towards restoration with one another. So they could bear truth to one another. Hard truths. They could carry burdens with each other.

All for the sake of becoming more like Jesus and sharing his love into this world. Now, don't you long for those kinds of friendships? I do.

[14 : 06] And the reason we long for them is because they're true. They do exist. And that's God's original design. Okay? And Jesus is now praying it forward into this reality that can be lived out through us with one another.

Okay, but his prayer's not over. Let's keep listening into this prayer. He says, He doesn't ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you've sent me.

So he prays for lonely hearts to be restored to God's original design of union. But he's also praying for his church, his people, the holy Catholic church, as we said earlier, to be a home for the lonely.

A preview of heaven. Okay? So that the world may believe that you have sent me. So here it's interesting. Jesus is giving the answer to the why of everything that he did.

Through the church, the world gets a preview of heaven. A place where God's love is really felt. Where there's a connection to Christ and to each other. And it becomes a home where people don't have to fight their battles alone.

[15 : 27] God gives us himself. God gives us each other. Now, if you look in the front of your bulletin, it's not the sticky note. We'll tell you about that later. If you look at the front of your bulletin, there's a quote.

I'm going to read that. This is from a guy named Sam Alberry. And speaking of this togetherness, here's what he says. Through being in Christ, we come to know God as our Father.

Which also means coming to know his people as our brothers and sisters. Being part of the people of God is not some optional in-app purchase we can choose to make after we've already become Christians.

Being in Christ means being a part of others who are also in him. We don't get him without them. We don't get him without them.

You see that? That union with Christ always has in mind and includes union with his people. And that kind of oneness is not optional. It's also not easy.

[16 : 28] Okay? But it is essential. And the world offers a counterfeit. Tim Keller puts it bluntly like this.

The world says be careful who you hang out with. Make sure you only hang out with people of the same income level so nobody's asking you for money. Make sure you hang out with people with the same golf handicap and dress size so you don't feel too inferior.

Hang out with people who are connected so they can help you with your agenda in life. Hang out with people who aren't too messed up so they won't always be calling you and talking about their problems.

That's what the world says. Do you know what happens though? When the bottom falls out of your life you'll find that there's nobody there for you. Do you know why? Because all of your so-called friends were friends you chose.

People you didn't have to invest in. Because you didn't invest anything. Now that you have a need there's nothing to withdraw. They're not committed to you and you're not radically committed to them. Christians are different.

[17 : 30] They love with their things. That's why it's visible. Do we? Do we? Do we? That's convicting isn't it? But Jesus doesn't just leave us sitting there in conviction.

He prays for a better way here. A way that starts when we're rooted in him. We've got this new tree that we put in place of an old playground. And the most important thing about Princess is her name is that she establishes roots.

And from those roots she will grow. And that's the most important thing. And it's no different with us. When we establish ourselves and our roots in our union with Christ provided through his Holy Spirit.

Then his love is going to show and it's going to flow through us. Southwood, how are we doing with that?

Does our union with Christ make a difference in how we live? Does our unity show the love of God to the world?

[18 : 39] Are we really places of restoration for one another in this world of shame and failure and loneliness? And what does that mean?

Think about God's love. Are we a place for God's love to each other? I like to ask myself this question. What does that mean? What does God's love, what does that feel like? What does that look like lived out?

I mean, you see it in the book of Acts. But for me, I have to go to things that happen in my life. These little snapshots. And underneath them, I can see God in them. And I think he's given me a glimpse of what it could be in a bigger way.

For example, a newborn baby. If any of you have ever held a newborn baby, there's a peace feeling that comes from that, right? If it's your own, you're like, nobody's mad at each other.

Nobody's hurt each other's feelings yet. I still remember holding John Paul like that when he was little. And I was like, man, I have not screwed this up yet. And there was just peace.

[19 : 41] And I think that's a glimpse of God's love that we can experience in his people. That there's no enmity and that by the power of God, we can be at peace with one another. And that's something that everybody needs in this world.

We can look at each other without enmity. We have to go through forgiveness trials to get there. But we can actually live and feel that little peace that you might see when you see a baby. That you can feel that when you see somebody else.

Animals. I think animals, God uses animals in incredible ways. For me, I like to go stick my head on the couch between my two dachshunds and just sit there. And there's this security and acceptance and joy and happiness that comes in that little moment.

And animals, you know, they love you unconditionally. Right? God loves you unconditionally. He gives us these creatures to show us things about himself. And so animal snuggles to me are rest.

Okay? And I really think that by the power of God, we can be a place of rest. That when you see someone or you're at dinner with that person, you're not afraid about going to dinner with them. And you're like, oh, man, I love to be around them.

[20 : 46] Right? God gives us a glimpse of that. And it comes from a rest in Christ. But we can be a place of rest in the chaos for each other and for this world. And then also a house.

Think about when you were a kid. Maybe some of you experienced this. Some may not have. But let's imagine that you were a kid. And you were able to go out and play all day. And no matter what happened, you knew that you could come back home.

Okay? Because it was going to be safe at home. And you were going to be accepted and at peace and rested. And that home was committed to you. And I think that by the power of God, that's a little bit of a glimpse of God's love, too, that we can be.

Where we can be at rest and at peace and committed to each other no matter what. We have the best interests of each other's in mind. And when you go through a problem, you're not afraid to talk about it. Because you know someone's going to be there to help you get to the other side of it.

And that all mirrors the love of God. And that helps me think about what we could maybe be to each other by his power. And you might be hearing this and thinking, man, I feel that.

[21 : 54] I want to help make this church better. I want more people to know Jesus. But honestly, I'm overwhelmed. I'm tapped out. I'm burnt out. I feel guilty about what I'm not doing. I really want this.

But I don't even know where to start, Derek. And maybe your thoughts sound more like this. I can't do this. Thank you so much for telling me another thing I can't do, Derek.

I don't even know how to be a safe place to my own friends or my own family. And how am I supposed to be a preview of heaven to a broken world? Really? And listen, I get that.

If that's where your mind is right now, one of those places somewhere in between, I get that. But I want to gently say that you're probably missing the point of Jesus' prayer.

If that's where you're staying in your head. Because he's not asking you to be the answer to his prayer. He's saying you already are the story that he's telling.

[22 : 55] Okay? He's prayed that forward. And yes, this world is a mess. He knows that. The church is imperfect. And nobody is meant to do this on their own.

But here's the good news. Jesus is not confused. He's not wringing his hands. He's not disappointed in your exhaustion. He knew exactly who he was praying for.

And he prayed anyway. Because you are precious to him. Like that newborn. And you're not the light. You're the lamp that he fills.

You're the vessel. Okay? So maybe instead of trying harder, let's let ourselves off the hook here a little bit. And maybe we just need to come closer.

Because here's the deep truth beneath all of it. Loneliness is not the end of the story. Jesus is. Loneliness may be loud. But it is not final.

[23 : 57] And Jesus' prayer is already answered. He prayed union into our separation and loneliness. And you might wonder, okay then.

So where do I start? And I could tell you, you just need to lead a grace group and join a grace group. And then all of that will happen. I could. I could say go help with the children's ministry.

And the kids that you stand up every time somebody gets baptized. I'm going to help raise them. What's their name again? You know, I could say go do all those things. And they're very good things. And we need to do those things.

But I don't think it's where you start necessarily. Okay? You got to start at the most important thing and then flow from there. The roots. Okay? And what did Jesus start with?

Rather than focusing on what he said in this passage, what is he doing? He's praying, right? He's about to die. And he's crying out to his father in the midst of that chaos.

[25 : 04] And I think that's where we start in our chaos. And all of those things I mentioned about church are so important to find community in different things.

But we've got to start with our roots where Jesus was showing us. Crying out to our father in the chaos. Okay? That's not easy to do for me.

If you look in your bulletin, there's a QR code in the notes section. And I made a resource for myself that shows all the things, or at least like, I think it's like 50 things, that are true when I'm in Jesus.

That I don't necessarily believe. And with all the bad in the world that I could talk about that's not really good that is also true, simultaneously true at the same time, are the things that are given as gifts to us through Christ.

Who we are. And so I'm trying to just, you might see me taking this piece of paper around with me when I'm in a meeting or in a moment and my head goes south. I've got to look at this and remember, this is who I am at the same time.

[26 : 06] So I'm offering that to you as a resource if it helps you. There's, I think, some in the back. But in case that's helpful. Oh, you're welcome. Because it's hard for me. Thank you. And so that's what I'm trying to do to get my head to remember who I am in Jesus and remember these truths simultaneously in the midst of the chaos.

And then bring him in there. But also, what does it look like to go to him in prayer, you know, and start with prayer and go from there, so to speak. It may be that you don't have union with him.

I don't know. Like, if you've never given your life to Jesus, that's a start. That's the place to start. And it's a long journey. I did that when I was 16.

And think about this. This verse is what I've been praying, Acts 4.13, for this church recently and for myself. Because you think sometimes you've got to have it all together. You've got to have everything in your head figured out and how to talk about Jesus.

No. Now, when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and perceived that they were uneducated common men. Thank you. Thank you. I don't have to have chat GPT to make you think that I know everything.

[27 : 13] Right? They were uneducated common men. They were astonished. Why? And they recognized that they had been with Jesus. That's my prayer for this church.

That's my prayer for me. That's my prayer for my family, my friends. That people would know that we've been with Jesus. That it would make a difference. It's not by intellect and all the things we got together and the careers and all this and that.

But by Jesus. It makes a difference. So what if you said, Lord, let me believe the things that are true about me that I forget. By the power of your Holy Spirit, Lord, would you be tangibly present with me today?

Help me to be sensitive to the people around me that you are using me to encourage. And please send people to me to encourage me with your love. Replace my loneliness with your comfort and your presence.

And help me notice when I need to cry out to you in the chaos. Just like that song said. I will trust in you. Lord, you promised never to leave me lonely.

[28 : 23] So I'm going to leave it all right here. I will trust in you. Cry out to the Father in the chaos. Okay, so plot twist though. Like any good movie. You're not the answer to Jesus' prayer.

I guess you're an outflowing of it. But he answered his own prayer. Think of that. Hours after he prayed this, he goes to the cross. You were on his mind clearly before he died.

And then he goes to the cross. The payment for sin is made by his death. The invitation into union with God is restored. Reversing what happened in Eden.

Giving eternal belonging and security. Loneliness is reversed. And through faith in him, just believing that it's true. And giving your life to it.

He says, you are now one with me the way that I'm one with God. The way that I am God. God is now in you. You're in me. We're in each other. I'm here all the time.

[29 : 28] As his precious and beloved creation. So that prayer has been answered. Which is why Galatians 3.28 says this. There's neither Jew nor Greek nor slave nor free. Nor male nor female.

But you are all one. In who? Christ. It's not on us. He took it on him. He's already paved the way. It's already a done deal.

Do we believe it? Will we live out of that? So just like any good movie though, there's a little bit more. Right? The credits are rolling. And what happens after that end of a superhero movie?

What do you wait for? Get out your phone. Is there an after credit sequence on this? Is there another scene after the credits? And there is in this one. And it's Revelation 21.

One day he's going to wipe away every tear. And death will be no more. Behold, I am making all things new.

[30 : 25] It is done. I'm the alpha and the omega. The beginning and the end. Jesus is the beginning and the end.

Loneliness isn't. And one day all that loneliness that we've battled. And all that broken relationships and mess. That you're living in. All the shame and the isolation. They're going to be gone.

Loneliness is not the end of the story. Jesus is. And his story never ends. And through faith, his story becomes our story.

And in that way we become one. With God and with each other. And that makes a difference in how we live. So back to that superhero movie.

The main character is fighting against his own loneliness. And the more he fights it alone, the worse it gets.

[31 : 22] And he grows darker and darker. And it starts to control him. And is almost going to take complete control of him where he's completely gone. And his loneliness says, it will always be just us.

And then right at the climax of that battle, one of those not so superheroes who's full of mistakes shows up and says, I'm here. You're not alone.

And at that moment he receives that strength to overcome the loneliness that he's been fighting alone. And as powerful, as moving as that was to me, like it really caught me off guard.

I got emotional. It was incomplete. It was incomplete because they were fighting in their own strength. Okay. And as we leave today, I want you to remember this in your loneliness or whatever the loneliness is you're in.

Whatever, fill in the blank. Christ not only says, I'm here. You're not alone. But he says, I've already won the battle for you.

[32 : 28] And as believers, we don't fight for victory. Okay. We live from it. And because of that, we can cry out to him at any moment.

Help me live as a victor in this moment. And when we do, we're not just practicing true community. We're practicing eternity with Christ and with each other.

And through that oneness, the world gets a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven. I'm with you in it. We're with you in it. God's doing something big with you.

Don't forget it. Let me pray for us. Father, I pray for your spirit to make these things true and lived out in us. That we may be the love of God to one another, living from your victory.

Praise you, Jesus, for what you did. Thank you for praying for us and answering the prayer yourself. God, you always answer and provide on your own. And you give us the gifts of your provision.

[33 : 30] Make a difference in our life. May we look forward to the kingdom of heaven. And may some today put their faith in you for the first time. And experience that union. Let us be rooted in you.

Thank you, Lord Jesus. We praise you and give you all the glory in Christ's holy name. Amen. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.