

John 14:15-18
July 9, 2023
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Be the Bench

I was at the beach with two college friends for a few days this past week. When I mentioned that my topic this week was Solitaire, one friend who was eager to help asked if I wanted to play Solitaire with her to help get me warmed up for sermon writing. She then caught herself and began to laugh, because of course Solitaire is just that—a solitary game. Sure we could have sat on the sofa and played solitaire sitting side by side like toddlers engaged in parallel play, but the game itself is designed for one player. As I mentioned in my newsletter article this past week, I learned to play Solitaire from some camp counselors about 40 years ago. It was a fun way to spend a rainy afternoon. I loved clearing the cards and would resist re-starting even when I had hit a dead end. And it was good for me to be alone without relying on someone else to entertain me, to learn how to be comfortable on my own. As you know, being alone and being lonely are not the same thing. In his note at the beginning of his recent book, *Together: The Healing Power of Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World*, Dr. Vivek Murtha insists that we need to:

Embrace solitude. The first step toward building stronger connections with others is to build a stronger connection with oneself. Solitude helps us do that by allowing us to check in with our own feelings and thoughts.¹

So Solitaire is not a bad game to play. Learning to spend time alone can be a good and healthy thing. Loneliness is not. And loneliness has reached epidemic proportions, impacting people of faith and no

¹ Vivek Murtha, *Together: The Healing Power of Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World* (New York: Harper, 2020) xv.

faith, people of every age, race, gender, and socio-economic status. And it does not have to be this way. I am convinced that God does not create us to be lonely.

Dr. Murtha's book went to press in 2020, just as the COVID pandemic was sweeping across the world, bringing everything to an abrupt and frightening standstill. The pandemic was not the first cause of increased isolation and loneliness, but the need to keep our distance fanned a burning ember into a wildfire. And yet with restrictions eased and life resuming some semblance of normality, we can't seem to shake the looming shadow of loneliness and isolation.

In our second lesson for this morning, Jesus is offering what has been called the Final Discourse. He has gathered with the disciples in the Upper Room and has washed their feet. After he finishes speaking and praying in chapter 17, they will go to the garden where Jesus will be arrested. Before this passage Jesus has begun telling the disciples that he will soon leave them. They are anxious, to say the least. [John 14:15-18, 27, The Voice]

The conversation between Jesus and the disciples is fairly one-sided in this section of John's gospel, meaning that Jesus does almost all of the talking. And he has quite a bit to say. Even though we don't hear much from them we quickly get a sense that the disciples are terrified about what lies ahead for him and for them. They are panicked about being left behind, left alone, orphaned without the care or guidance of their dearest friend and teacher. So Jesus tells them multiple times not to be afraid, and in this text he emphasizes that they will not be left to fend for themselves. He tells them that he will send "another helper," the Paraclete, which means "come alongside." In other words, as scholar Karoline Lewis observes, Jesus "tells his disciples that he has always been their Paraclete, 'I am sending

you *another* Paraclete.”² They—and we for that matter—have never been on our own and never will be.

Dr. Lewis and a friend meet regularly for coffee over zoom. Grief is one of their more frequent conversation topics due to the death of her friend’s husband in 2021 at the age of 43 and the death of Lewis’s own father last September. Lewis writes:

During our coffee date this week, my friend shared her experience of being at [a regional gathering of other church leaders. This gathering was intended to be] A time for sharing and learning with pastoral colleagues. A time for support and encouragement. But for my friend, too many times [it became a time] when she was asked to tell her story. And no one should expect you to tell your story if you are not ready.

She cried a lot. She thought about going home. After one of the sessions, she went outside to sit on a bench. A woman whom she didn’t really know came over to her and asked, ‘Is there anything I can do for you?’ My friend responded, ‘Just sit with me.’ And the fellow pastor did.

No words. No touching. Just sitting.³

Lewis’s friend was lonely in the midst of people, colleagues who supposedly know how to be with and talk with and support others who are grieving. But even the best pastors can flub and fail at being who and what others need at times. Lewis goes on to insist that:

‘Just sit with me’ is the very essence of the... [Holy] Spirit [in John’s gospel]. Our advocate. Our aide. Our intercessor. Our guide. Our companion. The one to whom we can say, ‘Just sit with me.’ Because that is exactly what *paraclete* means—the one who comes alongside you. It’s not

² Karoline Lewis, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/just-sit-with-me>

³ Lewis

an accident that the Paraclete's presence is promised in the Farewell Discourse. Hearts are troubled. Anxious questions are asked. Fear is palpable. But Jesus does not respond with explanations or easy answers. In the midst of grief unexplainable, unknowable, unimaginable, the only comfort is the Comforter. And isn't that what ministry is all about?⁴

Isn't that what ministry is all about?

About ten years ago, a student in York, Pennsylvania came up with the idea for a Buddy Bench: Back in the spring of 2013 when Christian Bucks was a 7-year-old first-grader at Roundtown Elementary School ... his family was considering a move overseas. While exploring schooling options, they came across something called a Buddy Bench at an international school in Germany. The idea is simple: if a child is feeling lonely on the playground, he or she can sit on the bench. The other students know that their classmate needs a friend at that moment and should go and ask him or her to play. Thinking that a bench like this on the playground at Roundtown could reduce loneliness and promote friendships, Christian suggested to his teacher and principal that they should install one at his school. ⁵

The Bucks family ended up not moving to Germany, so 7-year-old Christian presented his idea to the local school board and the concept took off. Christian was interviewed by the *Today Show*, did a TED Talk, and was invited to the White House. Buddy Benches are now a common sight on playgrounds everywhere. And there is no telling how many lonely children have benefitted from this simple and beautiful idea.

⁴ Lewis

⁵ <https://www.ydr.com/story/opinion/2018/12/03/buddy-bench-turns-5-christian-bucks-dad-offers-tribute-his-son/2190041002/>

“Just sit with me,” Lewis’s friend asked. She did not expect the colleague to solve or even heal her grief. She just didn’t want to feel so alone in that grief. The sad irony was that Lewis’s friend felt lonely in the midst of a large group of people who are trained to listen and walk alongside grieving people. Loneliness does not always look like someone tucked behind closed doors and unanswered texts. Loneliness happens in the midst of parties and family gatherings. Loneliness hides behind smiling faces and full social calendars. Loneliness even finds its way into worship on a Sunday morning.

The loneliness epidemic is staggering, so staggering that it can be difficult to grasp let alone tackle. But maybe one solution is something as simple as this work of coming alongside one another. In that colleague’s wise and humble question— “Is there something I can do?” and in her simply coming alongside her, Lewis’s friend knew—even in her grief—she was not isolated or on her own. For that moment and the moments that followed, she knew she had been seen and that she was not entirely on her own.

What would it look like for the church not simply to install a Buddy Bench but to **be** a Buddy Bench of sorts in and for the world? What would it look like for us to be a place and a people called and committed to sitting with those who are struggling, to coming alongside those who have no one to turn to, to seeking out those who need a companion? What would it look like to open our ears and our hearts to those who are struggling—not as experts who have all the answers, not as perfect people who do not struggle ourselves, but as beloved children of God, disciples who have not been orphaned, as fragile and occasionally frightened followers who have felt the Spirit come alongside us, too.

Solitaire is still fun, but no one should be forced to think it is the only game they can play. There is a saying attributed to author Ayesha Siddiqi that now appears on posters and t-shirts: “Be who you needed when you were younger.” If we did not have loving adults around us growing up this is a

reminder to offer the love, support, grace, or encouragement that we so deeply needed to the children or young people around us. If we *did* have what and who we needed growing up, it is still a reminder to be that as best we can to someone else. My guess is that most of us have felt lonely at some point along the way. We have been that child not invited to play. Or we have been that young person whose awkwardness makes them an outcast. Or we've been that stay-at-home parent drowning in onesies having conversations only with toddlers and *Bluey*. We've been that hard worker who puts in hour after hour to get ahead or simply to put food on the table speaking only with other work colleagues through a screen or a conference call or email. Or we've been that older adult waiting for a visit or a phone call.

The Holy Spirit does not simply blow in with wind and fire. Yes, it is the Spirit who gathers and send us to be the church in and for God's world. And it is the Spirit, the Paraclete who comes to sit alongside us, to be a companion for us, praying for us when we cannot find the words and spurring us to action when our confidence wanes. Could it be that that same Spirit is calling us now to be who we needed when we were lonely? Who among us in here and out there is pleading, "Just sit with me"? We cannot be all things to all people. We can be something to someone, however. By the grace of God, may the Spirit give us the courage to ask, "Is there something I can do?" By the grace of God, may the Spirit come alongside us, and drive us to find a way to be the bench, to be the someone, the something someone needs in Christ's name, whoever they may be.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.