

Vulnerable Church: Loneliness

Today we are finishing our Vulnerable Church sermon series and I want to begin by talking about Kate Bowler. Some of you may have read her book, *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*, and if you haven't read it I highly recommend it. The book is about her journey of suddenly being diagnosed with stage 4 cancer just as her career as a professor seemed to be taking off. She was happily married with a young child and everything seemed to be following the path she had hoped for herself when all of a sudden her world fell apart when she heard the words, "Stage 4 cancer." Her book became a best seller as it honestly and vulnerably talks through how a cancer diagnosis affected her mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. And as her health has thankfully stabilized, she's continued to explore themes that she first addressed in the book through her podcast and a few years ago, she devoted a whole podcast episode to what is our theme for today – loneliness.

In that podcast, Kate named that one thing she did not expect with cancer is how lonely she would feel so much of the time. And she didn't expect it because people were literally always around. They were bringing food to the house, visiting her in the hospital, she was with her family, but she still found that among many things, she felt what was at times an almost overwhelming sense of loneliness even though people were always around her. And she realized that loneliness can take many forms.

For some, loneliness can be physical isolation – you are literally alone. We often think of this type of loneliness maybe with someone whose spouse has passed away or someone who has recently gone through a divorce. Or maybe someone who is in a nursing home whose family is out of town and they don't receive a lot of visitors.

Secondly, there is the loneliness of rejection. This is the kind of loneliness that kids must feel when they are bullied or left out at school, or when LGBTQ people are cast out of faith communities or families. This is the kind of loneliness where for whatever reason or another, you're not accepted by your family or by your community.

But there's another kind of loneliness that I want to focus on today. It's what we see in our Scripture reading, the story of Hannah. She was not lonely in the sense that she was isolated from others. She had a husband. She was part of her community. But her suffering isolated her, or at least it made her feel isolated. She longed for a son, but, at least to that point in her life, she hadn't been able to have kids. Infertility remains a great source of pain for so many today, and it was in Hannah's day as well.

I think this is the kind of loneliness that Kate Bowler was experiencing, the kind of loneliness where you may be with people all the time, even people who love you, but you still feel like no one can relate to what you're going through. This is the kind of loneliness that people experiencing mental illness or PTSD may experience, those who find themselves with a debilitating physical condition or even a source of pain that may be hidden from the outside world or a grief that you carry that you feel you are all alone in carrying it, or those who are the

primary caregivers for someone suffering from a debilitating condition. This is the kind of loneliness where you may be with people, but you feel as if no one knows what you're going through.

Regardless of the type of loneliness, it is an epidemic in our society. In the podcast, Kate Bowler interviewed the former surgeon general Vivek Murthy who, in his role as surgeon general went across the country listening to people as they struggled with issues related to health. He heard a lot of stories about the opioid crisis, a lot of stories about mental illness, a lot of stories about lack of access to healthcare or the burden of healthcare costs, but one thing that surprised him is that beneath virtually every story he heard was this theme of loneliness. Murthy said that during his whole listening tour, that whenever someone centered on the theme of feeling lonely, that's all they wanted to talk about.

And he found that the percentage of those reporting feeling extreme loneliness held steady among all demographics – people near the end of their life, people with children at home, single people, married people, people of all races and ethnicities – all experienced about the same rates of loneliness. All of us, at some point or another, likely have experienced or will experienced loneliness. And all of us, whether we know it or not, have people in our lives who are feeling very lonely.

We live in a world where we are both more connected and perhaps more isolated than ever at the same time. We can literally get on our phones or ipads and pull up facebook or Instagram or twitter (or X) and connect, at least in some way, to millions – maybe even billions of people across the world. And don't get me wrong. I'm not going to stand up here and say social media is all bad. People have found amazing support groups online. People have reunited with old friends through social media.

But, at the same time, social media and technology can make us feel more lonely than ever. You know those times when we scroll through our social media and we see those in our contacts playing with their kids or hanging with their friends or doing super fun things with their partner or spouse, and, if we feel those places are lacking in our lives, then it can make our loneliness feel even more intense. One thing Kate Bowler named on her podcast, and I think it's really important for us to remember, is that social media, at its worst, can make us compare our average days (or even our bad days) to others' best days. Rarely do we see someone post the video of their kid having an epic meltdown and the parent losing it, but we know it happens. Rarely do we see someone post a video of an argument between spouses, but we know it happens in every marriage. You see, social media allows us to selectively share those parts of our lives that we think will make others think better of us, or just the parts of our lives that make us happy that we want our friend network to know about, but it can also have the effect, especially if we're feeling lonely, to see those posts and to think that everyone else has it all together and we are the only ones who don't....that we are all alone in our mess.

So let me give you a deep theological insight – we've all our shiiil...excuse me, we've all got our mess. You get the point and while I won't say the word in church, I do think the strength behind a word that is considered inappropriate may be the right word because all of us...every

single one of us...have times when we don't have it all together, when we feel like we are all alone in what we're going through, and when we think everybody else, but us, has it figured out. So when you feel that way, remember, we all got our.....It's never just you.

For me, one of my greatest times of loneliness was when I was ten years old in the 5th grade. I was picked on. I was made fun of. I wasn't one of the cool kids. I didn't wear the right clothes or the right shoes. It truly was one of the worst years of my life precisely because I felt so alone. But one thing was my saving grace: My friendship with Jody. Jody was a lot cooler than me. But he never made me feel that way. When everyone else was making fun of me, Jody stood up for me. When all of my friends decided they were too cool to come over to my house on weekends and hang out, Jody would be there all the time – or he would invite me to his house. What saw me through one of my deepest periods of loneliness was simply a good friend.

And I keep coming back to that story from the 5th grade because I think the remedy for loneliness is not that complicated. Murthy told Kate in the podcast, “To address loneliness is not about finding the right medicine, but it's about asking the right question – not who am I? but who am I in relation to others?” It is quite simply, what I found to be true when I was in the 5th grade – it was having a good friend. And that makes sense right?

You hear me say all the time that “God is love and each of us are created in love, by love, and for love.” That's a theological claim, but Surgeon General Murthy has given us some science to back it up. He said that “the capacity to give and receive love is what makes us human and that solving loneliness is planning on giving and receiving love.”

But sadly, instead of realizing that the solution to loneliness is loving, supportive, community, we often think it's about fixing ourselves or others. That's what happened to Hannah. The priest, Eli in this story is profoundly unhelpful and, frankly, downright mean. Rather than offering Hannah comfort, he accuses her of being drunk. While we may not accuse lonely people of being drunk, it is so tempting to blame people for their loneliness, or to blame ourselves for our loneliness.

“Well, they should just put themselves out there more.”

“Or if they didn't act sad all the time, then they would be more fun to hang out with.”

In Kate's book she names the frustration of all the people, even with good intentions, of telling her all the things she should be grateful for or offering her cliché answers to why she is suffering. I want to share with you a short reading where her husband shut that down immediately. Listen to these words:

“But most everyone I meet is dying to make me certain. They want me to know, without a doubt, that there is a hidden logic to this seeming chaos. Even when I was still in the hospital, a neighbor came to the door and told my husband that everything happens for a reason. ‘I'd love to hear it,’ he replied. ‘Pardon?’ she said, startled. ‘The reason my wife is dying.’ He said in that

sweet and sour way he has, effectively ending the conversation as the neighbor stammered something and handed him a casserole.”

It's not that the woman couldn't think of the right thing to say. Nobody has the right thing to say in these kinds of situations. Because there is absolutely nothing you can say to a young woman who thinks she's dying of cancer that can make it better. And that's precisely why Kate felt so alone. Because so few people were willing to sit in the discomfort of silence, sit in the discomfort of knowing that there's nothing they can do to fix what's happening. All they can do is to simply be present.

The mistake Eli made, the mistake the woman in Kate's story made, is they wanted to name how the one suffering should feel or how they should act and, in doing so, give themselves the false belief and security that they can somehow control what's happening. But that's no cure for loneliness or pain or grief or pretty much any source of pain. The only thing to do for that kind of pain, for that kind of loneliness is to simply offer presence.

I have a friend who made bumper stickers of a famous saying, though no one is quite sure who originally said it – But the quote is: “Be kind to everyone you meet. For we are all in a great struggle that others may know nothing about.”

So as we end this sermon series, may we commit ourselves to be kind to all, even and especially to ourselves. May we be willing to risk leaning into vulnerability when we feel safe to do so. And may we remember that it's not our job to fix those things that can't be fixed. Rather, it is our job to simply say, “I'm here for you. What do you need?”