

Seen, Heard, Known by Tamsin Levine

Good morning, and thank you for being here today. I mean that with deep sincerity, not just as an opening platitude. I see you and you and you and you... and graciously, so does God. From its conception, the Mental Health Team here at First Presbyterian Church of Yorktown has been focused on the people:

- the emotional needs of the people;
- training to become advocates and good listeners for the people;
- culling literature and other resources that would benefit the people;
- and giving space and voice to ALL the people.

It's because of you that our ministry exists. It is as a result of your experiences that we are moved to minister. So when we began our conversation about this Mental Health Sunday service, we sought to focus on issues that everyone can relate to.

A report that came out last year by the Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, says that one in every two Americans has reported experiencing measurable loneliness. That's half the country! This isn't like trigonometry which most of us will never encounter in our lifetimes.

Loneliness is a universally human condition. The scary news is that it's an epidemic that was on the rise even before Covid drove everyone into isolation. But the encouraging truth is that if loneliness is a human experience, then Jesus felt it, too. Jesus lonely? The man who was on a mission to minister and preach good news? The man with 12 disciples and probably more followers than Taylor Swift's Instagram account? Yes.

But why? Because loneliness doesn't just happen when we are alone. What I see in scripture is how many times Jesus was surrounded by throngs of people who almost all needed a touch or wanted a sign or just showed up to see what all the hype was about. Jesus spent the better part of three years expending emotional energy, physically exerting himself, and meeting the relentless needs of people who were after what He gave more than who He was. Obviously Jesus had meaningful moments also with those truly seeking a heart healing, but many times after a marathon of ministry He retreated to a quiet place where He could pray to God or rest with His disciples: those who knew him best. Of course, the ultimate loneliness for Jesus was on a cross of humiliation and pain. Sometimes loneliness happens when we are depleted after giving all we have.

No, loneliness doesn't just happen when we are alone. It can happen when we get lost in the crowd; neither seen nor heard even though we are physically present with co-workers, parishioners, neighbors, or family.

Some mornings I walk into this sanctuary and hyperventilate at the size of the crowd. And while part of my response has to do with catching Covid, feeling claustrophobic, and mentally preparing for the passing of the peace, there is a place deep within my soul that quietly wonders if I fit in. Without a show of hands, how many of you can relate?

Have you ever stopped to consider what a crowd of 5000 might have felt like along the Sea of Galilea? Or a group so big that Jesus had to teach from a boat on the water in order to address the full audience?

Scripture allows us to meet some of the people in the crowds during Jesus' earthly ministry. Consider the woman with the issue of blood. By Jewish law, she had no business even being in public, given her "unclean" status. Ostracized, financially depleted, and likely weak from an anemic state, her loneliness is evident in her mindset that no one would ever notice her in a crowd so massive that Jesus was pressed on every side. But Jesus did notice... in an instant. And not just because power had left him. He noticed because He knew her. He knew her name even if we never will. And He knows your name... and your issue... and your gifts that you're too afraid to use.

Blind Bartimaeus got swept up by the crowd that was following Jesus. Because who would actually notice a blind beggar on the side of the road? What did he have to contribute? He had a voice and a prayer that stopped Jesus in His tracks even when the disciples tried to silence him. The world might think Blind Bartimaeus had nothing until his sight was restored, and he became Bartimaeus, the follower of Jesus. But his loneliness isn't reflected in his physical limitations as much as in the disciples' inability to recognize his value.

And maybe that's something we as a church can reflect on today. What is the first thing we recognize about one another? Our talents? Our insecurities? Our religious beliefs? Or simply our value as children of God? We have the power to quell loneliness by opening our hearts to God's perfect spirit manifest in one another. Then when I say I see you, and you, and you, and you, what I really mean is:

- you are seen
- you are heard
- you are known
- and you are beautiful.

Amen.