

## Rebuilding the Foundations *Dangerously Lonely*

1 Corinthians 12:12-26

May 12, 2024

America is a dangerously lonely nation. That's the conclusion drawn by writer Ezra Klein in an essay earlier this year, and he has the statistics to back the claim. Fully one in three Americans feels lonely at least once a week, and the numbers are far higher for the young and the old, many of whom report daily struggles with loneliness. Cultural changes in recent years have exacerbated this reality. More interaction mediated through screens. Less belonging to organizations, teams, and clubs that meet regularly in person. More time spent at home. Less time with extended family, friends, and neighbors. Longer hours working. Fewer hours serving or volunteering.

The epidemic of loneliness has far-reaching impact. It threatens our individual health physically and emotionally as Dr. Chaddock and our CenterPoint therapists could attest. It also drives societal division. How? Decreases in human interaction tend to make us more fearful and less trusting of others. It is easier to demonize difference from a distance. We tend to move toward extremes when we do not interact soul to soul and face to face. Polarization is magnified. Pessimism proliferates. When we don't talk to each other, we cannot understand each other. And so, space necessary for nuance shrinks. The search for *shared* values is abandoned. Community collapses, and we live in the wreckage. We are dangerously lonely. Reading the essay, I kept thinking about the urgent need to rebuild relationships at the most basic level. I kept wondering where we might discover the capacity to begin rebuilding.

When the Christian movement was still in its infancy, ruptured relationships threatened to utterly destroy it. The Apostle Paul, early on, recognized that the risks

*within* the Church, within these fledgling Christian communities, were just as great as outside pressure and persecution. The risk of the Church collapsing from inside was as great as the risks outside. And so, Paul traveled all over the Roman world, visiting communities of faith and writing letters to their members, preaching the centrality of *unity*. Paul was insistent that in order to be faithful, the Church must offer a distinctive definition of what that word *unity* means. To illustrate this over the course of his apostolic career, Paul develops a metaphor for the Church. The Body of Christ. *You are the body of Christ*. Diverse and essential parts of the same living, breathing organism.

Paul writes in First Corinthians that there is one sentence that no Christian is ever permitted to say to another believer. There is one sentence that is forbidden for followers of Jesus. Are you ready? That one sentence is: *I have no need of you*. To say to another member of Christ's body, "I don't need you," is as ludicrous as one part of the human body saying, "I've got this. I can handle it all on my own."

Perhaps this will save you some frustration or resentment. You cannot handle this all on your own. And the good news is, you were never meant to try.

Now we could lay the blame for our epidemic of loneliness on many different culprits. The causes of our discontent are legion. But here is one that we should not ignore. It is the pernicious lie that interdependence is weakness. It is a myopic focus on self-sufficiency that swiftly shifts to self-righteousness. I can handle this all on my own. I've got it. Tell me: when did trying to understand someone else's perspective become a sign of deficient conviction? Yet another way of saying, "I have no need of you."

In a dangerously lonely time, what *do* we need? I have an answer. It is rooted in scripture and confirmed by experience. Here's what we need: every single one of us needs witnesses to our life. Regardless of our age and stage, every one of us needs the kind of people who show up for us. The kind of people who are there, just there, in moments of celebration or sadness. Those who are willing to set aside their own needs long enough to listen to ours. And in turn, we need to be such witnesses for each other. We need to show up for one another. We need to listen to one another. Perhaps the most faithful and countercultural decision you can make—and every single one of us can make it, and we can make it today, and we can reaffirm it every day. The most faithful and countercultural decision you can make is to become deeply invested in the life of someone outside of your immediate family. To show up for them. To be a witness to their lives. To honor the promise we make every time we celebrate a baptism. The good news is that there are countless ways to do this, and every single one of them matters. Lives are saved because people show up for each other.

Indeed, Paul says that the body of Christ is so deeply interconnected that when one member of the body suffers, all of us join in that suffering, and that when one is honored in any way, all of us join in rejoicing. Paul urges us to honor those who seem weaker and support the ones who need it the most. Talk about countercultural! We are taught and trained from a young age to measure ourselves against each other. And so, if someone else is honored, that means I am not. When we succeed, it is at another's expense. There can only be one champion. Second place is the first loser, and the weak just get in the way. I can attest that this ceaseless drive is both exhausting and ultimately unproductive because it ignores our most basic needs and only serves to separate us from shared experiences that make us human. Joy shared is joy multiplied. Grief shared is grief divided. We need each other.

This spring I am volunteering as one of the coaches for a fourth and fifth grade track team. Now, for most of the

kids this is the first experience of competitive running, and I use the term loosely because every kid who wants to be a part of the team is welcome to join. There are no tryouts and no required times. And what that means is that we have, let us say, a broad spectrum of speed and strength. At the meets, the runners are divided into heats that can last well over two hours. And on the Clay Center Elementary team, we have some very impressive young athletes. But here is what has impressed me far more. These kids, they instinctively adhere to the Apostle Paul's instructions.

When a runner, no matter their speed, posts a new personal best, teammates and rivals lift them with deafening cheers, high fives, and the kind of human pile that only ten- and eleven-year-olds can execute without injury. When a member struggles to get to the finish line on his own, a swarm appears, flanking the track on both sides to propel him forward. The shouts are just as deafening. *Keep going! You got this! You're almost there!* Last week, when a runner fell at the starting line, two competitors delayed their own race to help him up, costing themselves several places in the finish. When the emotion of the moment becomes too much, the community steps in with grace and compassion. After the last meet, another coach walked over to me and said, "Don't you wish the whole world could be more like an elementary school track meet?" It's a worthy goal. And maybe it can. Afterall, it's how we were built.

Rejoice with those who rejoice. Weep with those who weep. It's built into who we are. We need each other. One body. It is the truth we proclaim and the sustaining power behind our life as a community, that no one is extraneous, and no one can be left behind if we are all to make it to the finish line. Like the mosaic our community has been creating, it takes every part of the body to make the picture whole. And so, in dangerously lonely times, perhaps this truth is the foundation for our rebuilding. A community that embraces interdependence. People who find their deepest joy in being witnesses to each other's lives. This is what the Church can provide in a time

that cries out for experiences of belonging and communities of compassion.

Preacher Fred Craddock grew up in Oklahoma. Though his mother was a faithful member of the local church and took the three children each week, his father never attended church. He *would* never attend church. In fact, he complained every Sunday that lunch was late when the rest of the family would come home from services. Sometimes over the years, the pastor of the church would call, and Craddock's father would always say the same thing. "I know what the church wants. The church wants another name and another pledge. The church doesn't care about me. Just another name on the rolls and another pledge in the plates. Another name, another pledge. Right? Isn't that the name of their game? Another name, another pledge." *I have no need of them.* That's what he always said, until one time he didn't say it. He was in the VA Hospital and down to 73 pounds. They had put in a metal tube, and X-rays burned him to pieces. So Fred, his son, flew in to see him. His father couldn't speak. He couldn't eat. He was near the end. When Fred walked into the hospital room, he looked around. Potted plants and cut flowers on every single windowsill. A stack of cards twenty inches deep beside his bed. And even on that tray where they would have put food if he could eat, on that tray there was a vase of flowers. And all the plants on the windowsills, and every vase of flowers, every card in the stack, each beautiful blossom and heartfelt word, came from people or groups in the church.

Craddock tells the rest of the story: "Dad saw me pick up a card and read it. He could not speak, so he took a Kleenex box and scribbled on the side of it. He wrote a line from Shakespeare. If he had not written this line, I would not tell you this story. My father wrote, 'In this harsh world, draw your breath in pain to tell my story.'

"I said, 'What's your story, Daddy?'

"And, on that same Kleenex box, he wrote, 'I was wrong.'"