

Loneliness
A sermon preached December 2, 2007
by Rev. Mary Moore

One of our contemporary UU theologians, Thandeka, has been very active in supporting the Small Group Ministry movement, or SGM, within Unitarian Universalism. And she tells the story about how several years ago she spent an evening discussing small group ministry with the members of a very proper New England UU church who were interested in starting a small group ministry program in their church. At the end of her formal remarks she asked the members of the audience if they might be willing simply to get together in small groups over a meal and talk about their unmet needs in their church. One of the most respected elder statesmen of the church stood up and he slowly walked down the center aisle of that New England meeting house to the front of the assembled. And he faced the congregants and he said that he was interested in joining a small group ministry. He said that he'd wanted something like this for years because he was lonely. "I don't have any friends," he finally confessed. Now waves of shock rolled through the gathering. How could he be lonely? He was a loved and honored member of the congregation, a pillar of the church. Many people expressed disbelief. When the group quieted down, the man spoke again saying that "every man in this room who is my age knows what I am talking about. Our social upbringing has taught us not to talk about our feelings. We are not supposed to be emotionally vulnerable or close to anyone except our wives," he said, speaking as a heterosexual male.

Now some of you may wonder at Thandeka's story and even doubt the veracity of it. With the folks in that sanctuary, you might have disbelief that such loneliness exists in the midst of congregations. But let me say as a minister, I know this story to be true. It matters not if you walked in for the first time today or if you've been here for twenty or thirty or forty or fifty years. If you are single or partnered, young or old, an extrovert or an introvert, despite the best intentions of all of us, myself included, the promise of deep belonging that congregations hold high can still seem elusive at times. Some of us I'm quite sure feel lonely right now. Maybe it's our situation; maybe it's chronic depression. I'm sure that for some of us it was hard to get out of bed this morning. And it wasn't just about finding the coffee. Or perhaps it was hard to find the courage to come to church and to face other people. Right now we need connection or reconnection with other people. Maybe it's the longing that has brought us here this morning despite our fears. Maybe it's the longing that brings us all here every Sunday morning. For some people in church congregations in general and in this congregation in particular, Sunday morning at church is the only time that they experience human touch in the entire week. Remember that as you greet each other. Loneliness comes to almost all human beings. Curiously it doesn't seem to matter whether one lives alone or with others, whether one is rich or poor, whether one is ambitious or passive. Acute loneliness is not reserved for the aged. It can also strike the young and the middle aged as well. Some fortunate ones feel that they have never really known loneliness, but most of us have. It may occur after a divorce or a geographical move, after a death, the breakup of a romance, or the loss of a job. Or especially with low feelings of self-worth, when life seems to lose its very meaning. Loneliness often comes with overwork and burnout.

Back in the year 2000, the book, *A Cry Unheard: the Medical Consequences of Loneliness*, by James Lynch was published. I highly recommend it to you. Why that book could be the topic of a whole sermon by itself, indeed several sermons! Now to sum up the premise of the book using my lay person's language, to put it succinctly, cutting to the chase, loneliness can make us sick. It can even kill us and there are many scientific studies proving this. Polls indicate that twenty-five percent of the American people consider themselves to be lonely at any given time. Twenty-five percent – that's a whole lot of people, people who have active social lives and even those who live with other people. They too can feel lonely. Marriage or committed partnership does not inoculate one against loneliness.

I love the quotation of Anton Chekhov, the Russian author who wrote: If you're afraid of loneliness, then don't marry!! Loneliness, then is not physical isolation. I suppose it is possible for it to be. But it is also not very likely that we're going to become castaways at sea, or become lost in the rugged wilderness. These things usually don't happen to us. For if we float adrift on turbulent seas and wilderness wanderings there are more likely to be metaphors of the soul than physical locations. Loneliness paradoxically often can be a thing sensed in the presence of others. Loneliness is often felt most acutely in the crowd and especially at this time of year. Our loneliness seems to be magnified in the presence of others. What's this all about? What is loneliness about? What loneliness is about

I might wager to suggest is not so much a physical isolation but a kind of non-connection with the many many people who are actually very much around you.

And so I want to tell you a bit of what I know or at least what I think I know about loneliness. The first thing to know about loneliness then is that it's not the same thing as being alone, not the same thing as solitude. In the great religions -- Moses, Mohammed, Buddha, the proverbial enlightened sage sitting cross-legged on the mountaintop, they all spent time in solitude, and yet we would not call them lonely. At this time of year I remind you that in the Christian tradition there is loneliness in the Christmas story. I think about a year ago when a film was making the rounds entitled *The Nativity*, and it seems that the star, Mary, was played by a 16-year old young woman. And life imitated art, and she was pregnant and unmarried at 16, away from home and family. There is loneliness in the Christmas story. The author Michael McGee has written how ironic it is that Christmas as we know it today has shut out those whom Christmas was especially meant for: those who were in need of hope and healing. Just reflect for a moment on the difference between the original Christmas with an impoverished Mary giving birth to the baby Jesus in the darkness and silence of a shabby barn. And reflect and contrast this with our crazy commercial version today with the blinding glare of neon lights and the high decibel noise of circus-like malls and shopping centers.

There is not, I'm quite sure, a single one of us here this morning who has not known of loneliness whether for ourselves or for others in our lives. Now and then the memories come flooding back: of the first time we left home perhaps, or started at a new school or a new city, of a time when we found ourselves on our own in a faraway land or in a new and strange life, maybe in the military, maybe in some new and demanding line of work. John Maxwell writes about how there's the loneliness also of loss, of rebuilding our lives after the loss of a sibling, a parent, a spouse, or one of that cruelest of losses, a child. And then there's the loneliness of difference, of rejection, or being harassed and tormented because one is, one is -- one is what? One is black in a white school, one is gay in a crowd of straight classmates, Jewish or Islamic, skinny or fat- there is always something real or imagined. Loneliness comes to us in many forms, and there's also the self-imposed loneliness of adolescence which hits most of us, the special loneliness of adolescence, that we're quite sure that we're the only ones. Everybody else has friends - we're the only ones. Somehow we're the ugly ducklings -- we don't fit, we don't belong. I can remember feeling left out when others were enjoying the school dance. I wasn't among the ones selected off the wall. Often when we're young, we don't feel confident about who we are or what we can do. Let us remember that as we greet our young people in this church.

To feel alone is the opposite of feeling connected. It's easy for me to point out the ways in which we might seek connection. It's never easy to make that happen. So this morning I can point to the path that leads to connection, but only if each of us can find the strength and courage to take the first step along the path. And then the second step, and the third. It's not easy. It is not easy. While I am aware this morning that I am no doubt speaking to some people here who experience loneliness, I'm also preaching probably to some who do not at this time. Why, these folks feel connected, and accomplished and accompanied, and they actually get jazzed up for this whole holiday thing in a big time way. But I do guarantee that everybody here knows someone who struggles with and suffers from loneliness. And I believe that it's a good thing for those people here who do not struggle with it personally right now to be reminded that loneliness is something that is a deep struggle for many people. For always though we ourselves may find connection, there is someone else caught up in loneliness, even tragedy. Always someone who is lonely and longing.

But if this type of loneliness feels distant to you this morning, if this type of loneliness is not what has brought you here to this church; still, I invite you to remember about loneliness when you're considering whether to come to church of a Sunday morning, whether to invite someone in your life who is lonely to come with you to church at this time of year. Then if you come, you with your already established friendships and confidence, you may be a source of strength to others who are new or who are newly alone. Even if the sermon topic of the day sounds boring, God forbid, there may be others here who need a friend and that friend just might be you. For as another author wrote, It's in taking actions like these, inviting lonely people into our lives, and into this fellowship, into this church. It's in taking these actions we help others to feel connected. We help them to turn their loneliness into the presence of solitude and bring comfort as we walk as the author says into the chill winds of life. We are still alone maybe, but we are sustained by a sense of connections with others and the universe. It could be a sweater, it could be a cup of hot chocolate, it could be simply an affirming word. Speak those words. We may feel that we're still alone, but in our hearts we know we're not alone. We are connected. So be it. Make it be so. Go so and do.