

February 23, 2003
AM Service
Patchogue Church of the Nazarene

Help With Loneliness
Gen 32:22-30

22 That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. 23 After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. 24 So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. 25 When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. 26 Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

27 The man asked him, "What is your name?"

"Jacob," he answered.

28 Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome."

29 Jacob said, "Please tell me your name."

But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.

30 So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

Jacob is a study in loneliness. About 20 years before the incident of our text, Jacob had deceived his father and cheated his older brother, Esau out of a blessing. He was forced to flee his home because he feared what his brother might do to him when he found out. His mother loved him very much and he loved her but he would never see his mother again. She suggested that he flee to his uncle, Laban's home. Later, Jacob was betrayed by this uncle who also became his father-in-law. Jacob fell in love with Laban's younger daughter, Rachel and offered to work seven years for Laban if he could have Rachel as his wife. Laban agreed. Finally the time came for Jacob to marry Rachel. Everyone in the neighborhood was invited to the wedding feast. But that night, when it was dark, Laban took his older daughter, Leah, to Jacob on the sneak. Jacob didn't realize it was Leah until the next morning. Laban explained that it was not customary to marry off the younger daughter ahead of the firstborn. Then promised Rachel to Jacob too if Jacob would work for him for another 7 years. Later Laban and his sons turned against Jacob because of the wealth he had attained. So, Jacob decided to return to his homeland although he worried about how his brother Esau would treat him. On his way back he stop at a place where he had met with God 20 years earlier. He had sent everyone else

ahead. In v24 it says, “So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak.” Jacob was “alone” physically and lonely emotionally. And he wrestled not only with God and with man but also with himself. From his life we see some of the **causes of loneliness**: Guilt (cheating his brother and deceiving his father); Grief (the loss of seeing his mother); Betrayal (by his uncle); and insecurity (Jacob was alone. We can feel insecure and frightened when we are alone. But you can feel alone even when you are in a crowd of people. Remember how you felt the first day of school or on a new job? There were people around but you still felt alone. Loneliness can come from being insecure because of fear, strife, envy, jealousy, or failure - our own or when relationships fail us. Jacob experienced much of these emotions because of what he did to his brother. As he waited for his brother to meet him he had no idea how his brother would react toward him. He was insecure.)

Let’s give a **Definition of Loneliness**: You will notice that Jacob’s loneliness centered on his relationships (with his brother, father, mother, uncle, wives) which all fell short of being perfect. (1) *Loneliness is the pain or sadness we feel because of the absence or loss of meaningful relationships.* Yet, it is more than that. As we spoke a few weeks ago we were created for a perfect world (and perfect relationships) but we are in a fallen world (where relationships are less than perfect). (2) *Loneliness is the enviable pain or sadness we feel because we are living in a fallen, sinful world that cannot provide the perfect relationships we were designed for.*

Anything that confronts us with the harsh realities of this world, the heartaches, and especially the reality that no one comes through and satisfies my deepest need for relationship – not as perfectly as we wish- causes loneliness.

Wrong responses to Loneliness:

(1) *Immobilized by Loneliness*: This is when we decide to give up on ourselves and everyone else. We lose hope. Sometimes we may even choose loneliness – a protective loneliness (we choose to be alone though it is not always a conscious choice). Why? Because the pain of loneliness seems more manageable than the painful disappointment of seeking and failing to find that perfect relationship. Henry Nouwen made the observation that each of us tends to create our own Disneyland where we can have everything safely under control. Therefore, when something crashes into that make-believe world and forces us to face the reality that we are not in control of the universe we become threatened and lonely. We can even become gloomy and depressed – lose zest for life. In Gen 37:35 when Jacob thought his son Joseph had been killed by a wild animal, “All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted.”

(2) *Become frantically active by Loneliness*: While some are immobilized by loneliness, others are driven to a mad search supposing that somewhere they can find another mate, another job, another experience that can bring escape from loneliness. They try to fill the void many times leading to becoming workaholics, alcoholics, or sexually promiscuous in a vain effort to escape loneliness.

(3) *Other wrong responses to Loneliness:* Loneliness can be denied (you may say, “I’ve never really thought about being or feeling lonely), minimized (“Yes, I feel lonely at times but I know God is always with me.”) or trivialized (“So I feel lonely occasionally, doesn’t everyone?”). We can become cynics by saying loneliness is real – period! Or we can incorrectly see it as sin, an ungodly emotional response that reflects a lack of faith. Both extremes invite us to live a lie and reinforce a commitment to live in denial.

Suggestions to ponder about Loneliness:

(1) Acknowledge your loneliness. Loneliness can be denied, minimized, or trivialized but what does God want us to do with loneliness? Loneliness ought to be embraced. It is really true; sometimes the loneliness we feel is agonizing and we are tempted to avoid relationships. We must realistically face the present fact of loneliness, while at the same time clinging to a future hope (Heaven). We talked about this when we discussed finding help with stress. Nothing in this world is going to be perfect, not circumstances, not relationships not even our relationship with God will be perfect ... until we get to Heaven. 1 Cor 13:12-13 (NLT) “Now we see things imperfectly as in a poor mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God knows me now. There are three things that will endure--faith, hope, and love--and the greatest of these is love.”

This causes us to both grieve and have hope. And the hope should inspire us to be more Christlike and to give deeply to others in the midst of our own suffering. Choosing to enter your loneliness and choosing to love others even though you yourself are hurting is a chance to reveal the radically other – centered attitude of Christ. Let loneliness test your faith and strengthen your endurance. Faith is not strengthened by our ability to create and manage a predictable, smooth existence ... which is impossible. Faith is the capacity to embrace present life as it is in view of the future hope of God. Acknowledged loneliness helps reveal both our stubborn commitment to manage or avoid the risk of further pain and our demand for relief and it reveals the compassion of God who invites us to know Him and share Him.

(2) Let loneliness lead you to solitude. Jacob’s loneliness became a time of solitude with God. Soren Kierkegaard, in *Sickness Unto Death*, notes that the only use we have made of solitude is as a punishment for criminals- solitary confinement. In contrast, we need to discover the possibilities of solitude. And we can do this only as we see that loneliness can be viewed as a gift. Instead of escaping loneliness we must learn to allow it to lead us into solitude – a time of being alone with God alone. Don’t impose guilt on yourself for feeling lonely. Acknowledge your need of God (and supportive a Christian Community. Desire to be supported in your loneliness by the Christian community or a Christian friend but don’t demand your loneliness be relieved by them. Christian fellowship should support us in our loneliness, but it is not responsible for eliminating lonely feelings). Don’t pray for faith to conquer loneliness. Loneliness is not a problem to be solved or conquered, but rather one more reason to wrestle with God. When Jacob wrestled with God throughout that agonizing night, he was facing up to what he had become in the past 20 years. He was getting acquainted with himself all over again. He

wrestled not only with God and man but also with himself. He realized his wrong doing and need for confession. Jacob also got acquainted with God all over again. But this time he had to deal with God as God really is – not as Jacob imagined Him or as Jacob wanted Him to be. Solitude is peace with yourself and peace with God. But if loneliness is ever to be productive, it must be accepted, not fought.

Loneliness reminds us that God is the only One who will love us perfectly. Our security and significance is found in Him alone (God is really all I have). And although even our relationship with Him will not be perfect until Heaven we have that hope (of Heaven). We must learn to make the transition from loneliness to solitude. My pain causes me to realize and look for what I need from God alone). In solitude I can confess my sin of trying to find life independent of God. In Jesus we find peace – we can be at peace with ourselves and with God. In solitude we receive His love and power. The same power Jesus possessed. Jesus possessed all the power of God, but He chose not to use it to control or manipulate His world. Rather, He chose to use it for the good of others. We, too, can have great power in being bearers of God's image. Christ is being formed in us. We can choose to give to others rather than demand of them. We can choose to pour ourselves out for others.

This kind of self-giving is difficult when we are in pain. We think we have a right to be angry, and retreat into disappointment when our pain is not being taken seriously by those around us. The disappointment and hurt may be real but we are never justified to withhold love from others because we are in pain. Loneliness is an opportunity to capture a vision of God, His love and His purposes that transcend your pain. God passionately feels and sympathizes with our hurts, but calls us to a larger vision, an alternate view of reality - a vision of God and His other-centered purposes. There really is something more important than my struggle ... the glory of God! It's not that our struggle is irrelevant, but it is no longer getting our undivided attention. In my loneliness I am finding my refuge in the love and goodness of God. And I can choose to glorify God by moving toward others in the midst of unresolved loneliness and surprisingly experience joy.