

Sixth Sunday of Easter, A  
Acts 17:22-31  
I Peter 3:13-22  
John 14:15-21

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Portland Oregon  
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The isolation of pandemic has ended, and good riddance! But our Surgeon General is warning about another type of isolation threatening our health. It is loneliness. Plain old loneliness. It goes back even before pandemic. Dr. Vivek Murthy reports that *“At any moment, about one out of every two Americans is experiencing measurable [levels of loneliness](#). This includes introverts and extroverts, rich and poor, and younger and older Americans. Sometimes loneliness is set off by losing a loved one, losing a job, moving to a new city, health problems or financial difficulty.”* Sometimes we can't pinpoint the cause. Social networks that used to bring us together are not as strong as before. Technology can isolate us and social media can polarize. The United Kingdom has actually appointed a “Minister for Loneliness” in their public health system. Research says loneliness is as bad for people's health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. We are social animals, wired for belonging. It's as necessary as food and water to our well-being.

But loneliness has a cure, and we know what it is. The cure is building relationships. Making human connection a priority. Taking even small steps to reach out, in families, neighborhoods, to repair what is broken, to include people who are left out. It's something we can all do. In fact it came up as a major theme from First Immanuel's planning retreat a couple weeks ago. That group set a priority to strengthen relationships in our congregation in order to build a foundation to reach out. Every ministry team has been challenged to come up with specific ideas to foster relationships. In so many ways it's the perfect ministry for God's people, caring and bearing each other's burdens and practicing hospitality. I can't wait to see this intention bear fruit.

(See [nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com) *Surgeon General: We Have Become a Lonely Nation. It's Time to Fix That.* April 30, 2023 By Vivek H. Murthy and *How Can We Bring an End to the 'Epidemic of Loneliness'?* By [Shannon Doyne](#) May 8, 2023)

Loneliness is not what God intends for anyone. We are created to be friends with God, friends with one another, and friends with the natural world. And even when we feel lonely, we are never truly alone.

In today's scripture Jesus promises *“I will not leave you orphaned... I will never abandon you... I am coming to you in Spirit.”* Jesus says God's Holy Spirit is with us forever, says it three ways: We know God's Spirit, God's Spirit abides with us, God's Spirit is in us. Jesus

describes a relationship so deep it is mind-blowing, really. We are in complete, loving unity with God and each other. We're as close to God as Jesus is, we're as close to each other as we are to God. Jesus' words can make our head spin. *"I am in God, and you are in me, and I am in you"...* We'll never fully comprehend this relationship, this unity that God has made possible, but it's not something for us to overthink. It something for us to live. To claim as God's gift.

So we do claim this as our life reality: You are never truly alone. You are never abandoned. Anyone who says you're an outsider is wrong. The truth is, *you belong, in the most important way. You belong to God and you belong in God's creation. You have value. You matter.* Any thoughts you might have that you are alone or deserted or cancelled, are actually untrue. Because *now and always you are part of God through Jesus.* Now and always, *you belong to a community of human and divine love* that includes all of us. Now and always, we are one with God and one with Jesus and one with the Spirit and one with each other.

This is the relationship we've been longing for, forever. It's the relationship of St. Augustine's famous prayer: *"Our hearts are restless till we rest in You."* It is our place to rest and belong. We were created to live in this unity.

And people outside faith communities are longing for this unity just as deeply. In twelve-step groups, people speak of this longing as relationship with a "higher power." The language is intentionally left open, not defined, so anyone can participate. The open-ended language allows people to grope for God and connect as they are able. Because when you are dealing with really deep life problems, you have to call on a higher power for help. You have to discover your unity with the One who gave you life, however you are able to name it, however you can connect.

We live in an age when unfortunately the reputation of Jesus Christ has been tainted by people who use Christ's name for judgment and hatred. The sad reality is that our neighbors who are searching and longing may not think of good news when they hear the word Christian. Many of our neighbors will use other names to call out to God. But this is not something new.

When Paul the missionary visited Athens two thousand years ago, he was looking for a way to express Christ's love to people who'd never heard of it, and might not think much of it. In Athens Paul saw all kinds of temples and altars, including one that was dedicated to "an unknown God." So Paul declared to whoever would listen: Our God is that unknown one, the one you don't know yet. But God wants to be known by everyone. God is the one *"in whom we live and move and have our being."* What a beautiful way to

describe our higher power, the power of love and life. God is the one *in whom we live and move and have our being*. God is the love that holds us, the unity that connects us.

All throughout time people have been searching for God. Today people are searching for connection with the One who gave them life. People are searching for loving connection with the human siblings around them. And here is the beautiful good news: while we are searching, God is also searching. God has been searching and finding God's beloved people, all this time. And God's love brings us together. I wonder how we can share this belonging with everyone.

I'll close with a story that's been shared by people on many different spiritual paths, from Christian to Muslim to new age thinkers. The story goes like this:

*In a mother's womb were two babies. One baby asked the other: "Do you believe in life after delivery?"*

*The other replied, "Why, of course. There has to be something after delivery. Maybe we are here to prepare ourselves for what we will be later on."*

*"Nonsense," said the first. "There is no life after delivery. What kind of life would that be?"*

*The second said, "I don't know, but there will be more light than here. Maybe we will walk with our legs and eat from our mouths. Maybe we will have other senses that we can't understand now."*

*The first baby laughed, "That is absurd! Walking is impossible. And eating with our mouths? Ridiculous! The umbilical cord supplies nutrition and everything we need. But the umbilical cord is so short. Life after delivery would not be possible at all. It's just not logical."*

*The second baby insisted, "Well I think there is something and maybe it's different than it is here. Maybe we won't need this physical cord anymore."*

*The first replied, "Nonsense. And besides, if there is life, then why has no one ever come back from there? No, delivery is the end of life, and in the after-delivery there is nothing but darkness and silence and oblivion. It takes us nowhere."*

*"Well, I don't know," said the second, "but certainly we will meet Mother and she will take care of us."*

*The first replied "Mother? You actually believe in Mother? That's crazy. If Mother exists, then where is She now?"*

*The second calmly and patiently tried to explain. "She is all around us. We are surrounded by her. We are of Her. It is in Her that we live. Without Her this world would not and could not exist."*

*Said the first: "Well, I don't see Her, so it is only logical that She doesn't exist."*

*To which the second replied, "Sometimes, when you're in silence and you focus and you really listen, you can perceive Her presence. You can hear Her loving voice calling down from above. You can hear Her beating heart."*

(Story reportedly from [Your Sacred Self](#) by Dr. Wayne Walter Dyer, 1940 – 2015)

Well, take from the story what you will. To me, it says...

There is always more going on in this world than we can perceive. More love, more care, more providence. Our perspective is laughably narrow, and God's loving reality is beyond anything we can know or understand. But fortunately our limited imagination and perspective do not limit God in the least.

God is the One in whom we live and move and have our being.

We give thanks for the times when we perceive God's presence, like the heartbeat of a mother carrying children... carrying a whole planet full of children... God's heart beating all around us and even within us. God our creator, our heavenly parent, God our savior, God the advocate who accompanies us. God our friend, our companion, God the very source and goal of our life.

We are never alone.

Thanks be to God. Amen.