



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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LONELINESS

Someone once likened hell to being alone in a disco: the loud music bombarding and dulling the senses making the loneliness even more intolerable. With or without the disco, hell is surely being alone -- entirely without God. We've a sense that being alone is contrary to our nature, and so it is. "God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone.'" (Genesis 2:18) We are created to enjoy the fellowship of other people as well as that of our Creator. But in the fallenness of our present nature, we so often have loneliness rather than the fellowship we crave. It may be that we lack a friend, a confidant, with whom we could share the things which are important in our lives. Or it may be that we want passionately to be married. Or loneliness may come on a more occasional basis, when we travel, for example, or work apart from our family or friends.

While loneliness is inevitably unpleasant, it can also be a serious spiritual problem. It can so dominate our outlook on life as to interfere with everything else. When we are lonely and give ourselves over to it, it seems that nothing is really very pleasant. The good things are tainted because we have no one with whom to share them. The bad things are more painful since we must bear them alone. We suffer doubly from the bad, and cannot enjoy the pleasant and beautiful. Loneliness can affect everything that we do, even our prayer. When we come to our time of quiet, loneliness is the first order of business, and sometimes the only one. We tell God how much we hurt. We plead with Him to send us a friend so that we can get on with life and serve Him joyfully.

Here is where the danger comes. It is perfectly appropriate to share with God how we are feeling. But if that becomes a matter of our making demands upon Him, then we have misunder-

stood our relationship with Him. To say "I am lonely, help me to bear my loneliness" is fine. To say "I cannot go on like this; You must give me a friend" is not. It puts conditions on our devotion to God. We are saying in effect, "If you give me a friend, then I will serve you. I cannot do it otherwise. I cannot be a good Christian unless my loneliness is satisfied." This, in turn, means that we do not really believe in grace: that even in the worst adversity (in this case, loneliness), our communion with God need not be disrupted. We sell Him short, being overcome by our need.

The root of the problem is this. We have fallen into temptation by not trusting to the power of grace to overcome all adversity. Instead we have given loneliness power over ourselves. The problem becomes not so much that we are lonely, as that the loneliness overwhelms everything else in our life. The passion (and loneliness can be as much a passion as love) comes to dominate even our relationship with God. We speak of nothing else with Him. We want Him to satisfy the need. We share it with Him, to tell Him our pain and what He should do about it.

But we do not give it over into His hands. We still cling to the pain -- and to the hope of its satisfaction. If we share it with God, it must be with the aim of allowing Him to take over, of giving it into His hands. This means that we then allow Him to deal with it, as He sees best. He may send us someone to be a friend. Or He may leave things as they are for a time, so that we can learn to depend on His grace alone.

When we are lonely, we must acknowledge the fact so that we can keep it from turning into that overwhelming passion. We want to keep it from taking over our lives. It helps us as we share our pain with God, to remember Jesus' life on earth, which certainly had its share of loneliness. Jesus was constantly misunderstood by the Twelve. He was betrayed by one of them. The rest forsook Him in His time of need. Even his family appears to have misunderstood him, when early in His ministry they came to take Him home (Luke 8:19-21). He had no wife, and no special confidant with whom He could share everything. The beloved disciple, John, was no doubt close to Jesus. But he was also capable of sleeping in Gethsemane, and ambitiously seeking the place of honor in Jesus' kingdom. Not exactly the support and understanding that one would wish from one's closest friend! Yet we never find on His lips a word of resentment or recrimination, even at the hour of His passion: He did not say, "I don't need this right now." He knew loneliness in His time on earth, and He shows us the way to deal with it.

This means that we can share our loneliness with Him quite directly, and be sure of a sympathetic hearing. He knows what it is like from His own human life. We can find in Him something of that

friendship which we seek. It is not the same as an earthly human friendship, to be sure. But unless we are willing to share honestly with Jesus we can hardly expect Him to take care of us. Our friendship with Him is characterized by that trust which allows us to be honest and without pretence. If we can also be quiet and listen, we will find a sympathetic answer as well. For He is willing to bear the burden -- of our sin and all our trials, even the trial of loneliness.

We may hesitate to ask Him to do so. It may seem rather selfish. My loneliness affects only me, after all: hardly a cosmic problem! Why should I bother Him with it? Yet this misunderstands His love. His love is so profound as to be willing to die for each of us while we were yet sinners and utterly undeserving of His gift. How can we underestimate such love? Surely He wishes in the fulness of that love to share all that is important to us. Our response to His love -- our love for Him -- should make us ready to respond, in this case, by sharing our loneliness with Him.

We may also be reluctant to share our loneliness with Jesus for fear He might ask us to bear it rather than take it away: for fear the answer might be no. If we put the whole problem into His hands, we commit ourselves to living with His solution rather than insisting upon our own. This always has a certain risk to it: to put ourselves in Another's hands. Yet, knowing as we do God's love for us, we are assured that He wills for us only that which is best for us: best to fit us for His service. So it is not really much of a risk -- except to our prideful desire to control everything ourselves.

Practically, then, how are we to deal with loneliness? The first step is to acknowledge that we are lonely. Sometimes we refuse to see our pain, for fear that seeing it will make it worse or that there is even more pain underneath the surface. Sometimes we deny it because loneliness will interfere with our pretensions to being self-sufficient. (If we pride ourselves, even privately, on our abilities to live on our own, loneliness will interfere with our self-image. Rather than revise the illusion of independence we may just deny that we are in fact lonely.) Whatever the obstacles, we cannot be healed of our loneliness so long as we deny it.

Having admitted that we are lonely, the next step is to share it with God. This involves a frank admission of our pain, and our honest desires in the matter (for a friend or spouse, e.g.). We share this in a spirit of humility, not as if we are telling Jesus something He does not know of His own experience. Our pain is not superior to His!

In sharing it with God, we must give it over to Him. This means allowing Him to bear the burden of the pain, and allowing Him to take

care of the solution. His answer may be to send a friend. Then we should return to give Him thanks, accepting the blessing as His gift. Or the answer may be that we are to bear the loneliness for a time, perhaps indefinitely. In this case, we may be sure that the answer will be accompanied by an offer of grace to enable us to bear it without being overwhelmed. It may not be the answer we want! But if it is the one which comes, we may be sure it is what is best for our sanctification.

Sacrifice is required of us, in putting it into God's hands. Our desire must be sacrificed: we must put it aside, and allow the love of God to be at the center of our being. Then if we are lonely we will not be dominated by our loneliness but by God's love for us. Loneliness may be part of our daily life, but so will Christian joy and love. To accept God's grace to live with loneliness requires an act of will. We are free to wallow in our loneliness if we choose. But we also have the freedom to accept the grace to rise above it. This is not easy. It requires that we admit that our loneliness is not the most important thing in life, and that we will get on with life without insisting that everyone (including God) see how much we suffer. Therein lies the sacrifice -- and the great benefits for Christian character if we are willing to make it.

God's grace, and the support of His companionship will not remove the desire for friendship -- nor should it since the latter is part of our humanity. The unfulfilled desire will still be there. But as we accept the grace which allows us to live with it, we learn that a joyful and contented life is possible. We learn that it is not that hard to get on with our Christian life even in the midst of loneliness. This is an important lesson: loneliness cannot separate us from the love of God.

More important is the dependence we learn. In admitting our impotence to deal with our loneliness, we learn practically to depend on God. Apart from Him we would be overwhelmed and life would be a misery. But having humbled ourselves to accept His help, we learn that true joy is to be found in Him and not in our own efforts. In this dependence we also draw close to Him: we experience His fellowship. And we learn the most important lesson: we are not alone.

