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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Luke 24:13-35

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

While they [the two disciples] were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them.
(Luke 24:15, RSV)

This is a sermon about loneliness. People are starting to say that loneliness is a vast, unrecognized health crisis in our land. Psychiatrists and therapists can treat depression, for example, with medicine and talk therapy, and praise be to God for good psychiatrists and therapists. Still, in some cases, there might be something *underlying* the depression – a sorrow, a sorrow of the heart that medicine and talk therapy does not really touch. People are lonely in our land and it is breaking them down in various ways. At least, that is what some health experts are beginning to think, and it has a ring of truth to it, in my opinion.

On most Tuesday mornings, I sit at my Pastor's booth at the corner of our church, at 88th Street and Lexington Avenue. As I walk to the church earlier in the morning, I try to think ahead to the people I might meet that day at my booth and I pray for them. I pray that I might listen well to the people and then answer well, trying to encourage them by speaking of Jesus. You have probably heard me say before that sometimes people sit down on the stool at my booth and begin to cry. I have learned to have a box of tissues there. We all have our own stories – our own hopes and dreams, sorrows and setbacks, fears and disappointments and prayer requests.

Now, all kinds of things are spoken of at my Pastor's booth, but I do not recall anyone actually saying to me, "I am lonely. Would you pray for me that I will gain some good friends." It is almost as if people think loneliness too light a thing to mention. Maybe they think that they are supposed to struggle with loneliness on their own – that they should somehow buck up and go get themselves some friends... only they have not had much success so far and they are hurting.

In this sermon I want to speak of loneliness by speaking of Jesus. One thing I think we can say about our resurrected Lord Jesus is that he is not a lonely man, and he does not want us to be lonely either. Jesus has a sociable nature, he has friends, and he wants more of them. In fact, he would be glad to count you and me among his friends, if we are willing.

I bet you would agree with me that it is not out of character for Jesus to do what he does in this morning's Gospel Lesson. He walks on up to two people

walking along the road, and he joins them in conversation. That is what he had done to the fishermen along the shore, casting their nets into the sea or mending their nets in the boat (Matthew 4): he had talked to them, “Come, follow me.” That is what he had done to the man at the pool of Bethesda (John 5). The man had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. Jesus sees him and strikes up a conversation with him. It was the same with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4). That’s what he had done to that wee, little man Zacchaeus up there in his sycamore tree:

“Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” (Luke 19:5, RSV)

It is true that from time to time, Jesus would withdraw to a lonely place apart. He would go up a mountain alone, for example, to pray (Matthew 14:23). But Jesus did not remain apart. His heart inclined toward others and so he would seek them out.

Think of the alternative. Jesus could have been a solitary man. In a way, he was so *unlike* other people that maybe that would have been natural for him, even restful for him. I mean, he was tempted like other folks, but did not yield to temptation, unlike the rest of us. Maybe being around people who so regularly fell would be discouraging for Jesus and he might have preferred a solitary life. But he did not. Jesus knew the ways of human beings, and loved to be with us anyway.

His first deed when he was ready to start his public ministry was to call disciples. He did not mean to do his work alone. He surrounded himself with disciples, with students. They called him “Master,” but his heart inclined toward calling them “friends”:

Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends... (John 15:13-15, RSV)

Some people have a kind of sturdiness of soul such that they can go on in life alone. Jesus was not such a one. Or rather, Jesus was the kind of man who could indeed go on life alone, but it was clear that that is not what he wanted. When he reached the crisis of his life in the Garden of Gethsemane, he wanted his friends nearby:

³⁶Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, “Sit here, while I go yonder and pray.” ³⁷And taking with him Peter and the

two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. (Matthew 26:36-37, RSV)

Of all the sad lines in the story of our Lord's passion, perhaps this was among the worst of them for Jesus:

Then all the disciples forsook him, and fled. (Matthew 26:56, KJV)

The dramatic final line in the Maundy Thursday liturgy captures some of this sorrow for Jesus. When we reach the final verse of Psalm 88 and the final lights in our church are about to be extinguished, leaving us in darkness, it is easy to imagine Jesus breathing this lament:

My friend and my neighbor you have put away from me,
and darkness is my only companion. (Psalm 88:19, LBW)

On the cross, Peter is not his companion. He had called his disciples "friends," but they have forsaken him and fled. Darkness is his only companion.

One of the precious testimonies concerning Jesus is about the stability of his character. It goes this way:

Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever.
(Hebrews 13:8, KJV)

In this morning's Gospel Lesson, we see this stability at play. Jesus sought company before his death. He seeks it now still. And so, he sees those two disciples walking their path toward Emmaus, and the way the text puts it is just like Jesus:

...Jesus himself drew near and went with them. (Luke 24:15, RSV)

Jesus is not a melancholy man. Jesus is not a man who has no time or use for friends.

This means that we have a risen Saviour who sympathizes with us if we should be lonely. Being alone, being forsaken, being letdown: these are not human experiences toward which our Saviour is indifferent. With his mighty voice, he has declared our nature as social beings from the very beginning:

And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone... (Genesis 2:18, KJV)

Our Maker does not want us to be lonely. He did not build us that way. He wants us to face this life with the company of friends.

So, I have three thoughts for you about being lonely:

First, take some comfort in the gospel truth that our universe is in the hands of a sociable Lord. He seeks friends, he values friends, and he does not want you to be lonely. I am a pastor, and so I bet you will not blame me if I speak of the church. If you are lonely, come to church, as you have done this morning. Come to be in the presence of this risen Lord who is the best friend we will ever have, who gives even his body and his blood for us and want us to be encouraged. And do not come just to church, but also to coffee hour. Come looking for friends. There are good people here in church.

Second, try to reckon with the idea that there is a lot of loneliness in this world, and make yourself available to help others along. Take some time to listen to people and then to try to answer back in a Godly way. Our neighbors are living in world that too often tells them that nothing really matters, that there is no God, there is no objective truth, there is no objective good. And many of our neighbors are starting to become discouraged and to wonder, "Is this all there is? Is nothing real except for biochemical reactions? Is there no real beauty, no true love, nothing worth dying for? Is this all there is?" Well, if you have some faith in Jesus Christ, then you have a gift in this life. Try to pass on the gift you have received.

My final thought concerns the difference between "loneliness" and "being alone." Let me linger with this a bit as we approach the end of this sermon.

Jesus was alone from time to time, but he was not lonely. For one thing, when he would retreat to a lonely place apart for prayer, he was mindful of God. He was never alone in that sense. He knew that his heavenly Father kept his eye on him and loved him, and if all others should forsake him and flee, he knew that his heavenly Father would not. And so Jesus could bring to mind the words of Psalm 121, for example:

¹I lift up my eyes to the hills.
From whence does my help come?
²My help comes from the Lord,
 who made heaven and earth.
³He will not let your foot be moved,
 he who keeps you will not slumber.

Jesus could recall the testimony of Psalm 139:

⁷Whither shall I go from thy Spirit?
 Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?
⁸If I ascend to heaven, thou art there!
 If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there!

⁹If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
¹⁰even there thy hand shall lead me,
and thy right hand shall hold me.

And so, even when Jesus was alone, he was not lonely, for he shared prayer with his heavenly Father.

The other thing I observe about Jesus is that his times of being alone were always followed by his return to his friends. He did not choose to be alone for the sake of turning away from his friends, but rather to turn toward his friends with increased strength and goodness.

Let it be so with you and me. If we should be alone, let us use this time to prepare ourselves for the company of others. Being alone is not a time to let things fall apart in our lives, but rather a time to become stronger for the return to society. When we are alone, then, let us read more, let us write more, let us pray more, let us learn the art of silence again, so that we can be comfortable to be with others even in silence.

It is part of the sociable nature of our risen Jesus that he likes to have company. And so he hastens to be with us this morning, including this Holy Communion to which we now turn. As we hear his divine words, "This is my body, this is my blood," let us hear the speech of a friend – indeed the dearest friend we shall ever have, ever Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.