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A Letter from Paul – Philippians
VII. Co-Workers in Christ
Philippians 2:19-30

Dr. William P. Seel
Easley Presbyterian Church
Easley, South Carolina

Just over twenty years ago, Harvard professor Robert Putnam published an article that set off a whirlwind of debate, which continues to this day.¹ In fact, the title of that article, which was “Bowling Alone,” has become a catchphrase among researchers and pundits concerned about the decline of social capital in America. In the article, Putnam traces a significant decline in communal participation over the last several decades. For example, he found that between 1982 and 1993, the total number of bowlers increased by ten percent; but that the numbers bowling on a team declined by forty percent – hence the title, “Bowling Alone”. He found that participation in parent-teacher organizations had declined by nearly fifty percent since the mid-60’s; that fraternal organizations, such as the Shriners or Lions, had all experienced between fifteen and fifty percent declines in membership – while losses in women’s clubs were nearer to sixty percent. And on the article went from there. Americans, he found, were simply doing less things together, harming not only the social capital by which communities thrive, but also harming the personal well-being of what amounted to an increasingly lonely population.

As I said, Putnam’s article has launched a thousand studies since. And study after study since have come to the same conclusions: that Americans are increasing more isolated from one another and more lonely in their daily lives. In fact, numerous studies have been devoted to the decline in the number of close friendships among women, and the near absence of close friendships among men. And numerous other studies have charted the significant mental, emotional, and physical ill effects brought on by this increased loneliness.

So, I suppose it comes as no surprise that a recent Harvard University study concluded that the Covid pandemic, and the social protocols put into place to help control the spread of Covid, have resulted in Americans feeling even more lonely than ever.² More than one in three Americans in that study reported experiencing “serious loneliness” in the four weeks prior to the Harvard survey. Two groups reporting large percentages of serious loneliness were mothers with young children (51%) and, somewhat surprisingly, young adults aged 18-25 (61%, which the study labelled as “staggering”). What all of this says to me is that even though, on the surface, we may seem more connected to one another than ever before through social media, behind the screens and the zooms and the followers and the likes, we are – and have been for some time – experiencing a loneliness pandemic which is deeply significant for American well-being.

After all, from the theological point of view, it was no one less than God Himself who said that “*It is not good for the man to be alone,*” as He looked down upon solitary Adam in the Garden

of Eden.³ But God not only diagnosed the problem of loneliness long before it become our modern problem, God from the very beginning was also already working on and providing for us a cure from our loneliness. To solitary Adam He gave Eve, a helpmate fit for him, indeed “*bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh*”.⁴ And then to Adam and Eve He gave children – and the gift of family was born to combat our loneliness.

But supremely what God did to overcome our loneliness is that He created for Himself, and for us, a people – the family of God. In the great promise God made to Abraham, the Covenant which leads to Christ and to our salvation, God promised Abraham and Sarah, who had no children of their own, that He would make of them a great nation.⁵ And this God did. He made of Abraham’s offspring one people – of many tribes and yet one in their covenant connection to God and to one another. And so that Israel would never destroy those covenant connections one to another, as God’s people, He gave them the Law on Mt. Sinai, instructing them how to get along with one another.⁶ And so that they would never take for granted the great value of this gift of community and communion which He had given to them, what He taught them above all the other commandments, save one, was that they were to “*Love their neighbor as themselves.*”⁷

Two of my favorites verses from the Old Testament reflect this theme, this gift of God – although there are hundreds upon hundreds more which say the same. But first is Psalm 68:4-6:

*Sing to God, sing praises to his name;
lift up a song to him who rides through the deserts;
his name is the Lord;
exult before him! [Why?]
Father of the fatherless and protector of widows
is God in his holy habitation.
God settles the solitary in a home.*

That home, of course, being the covenant family of God, those whom the Psalmist elsewhere refers to as the “*people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand*”. And the second favorite verse, Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, describing the blessings and advantages of our God-given gift of community:

*It’s better to have a partner than go it alone.
Share the work, share the wealth.
And if one falls down, the other helps,
But if there’s no one to help, tough!*

*Two in a bed warm each other.
Alone, you shiver all night.*

*By yourself you’re unprotected.
With a friend you can face the worst.
Can you round up a third?
A three-stranded rope isn’t easily snapped.⁸*

In answer to God's own diagnosis of the problem of human loneliness, God Himself creates and prescribes the cure: He binds us together like a strong three-stranded rope – a tightly bound fellowship based on the three-stranded cord of His own existence as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He places us within the family of His people, gives us to one another within the communion of the saints – so that no one should be alone, so that all should be strengthened and helped by others.

And, in the New Testament, this gift is only broadened and deepened. What is the very first thing Jesus does after He announces the beginning of His public ministry? He gathers twelve disciples and binds them together as His own companions, and as companions to one another.⁹ Twelve – twelve tribes in the Old Testament people of God, twelve disciples as a sign and symbol of God's intention to draw together all the peoples of this earth into one family, one fellowship, one belonging in Jesus Christ – one Body of Christ in the world.

And again and again we see Jesus acting to overcome human isolation and loneliness, even as He overcomes human fallenness and brokenness. Remember how He meets the Samaritan woman at the well at midday. The fact that she went to the well alone at midday, rather than in the cool of the morning with all the rest of the village women, tells you everything you need to know about her isolation and loneliness. And Jesus not only binds her to Himself through His gift of grace, that promise of a spring of water welling up in her into eternal life, but He also sends her back to her village with that Gospel news – and as she shares it with everyone, the Bible says those snobby villagers who had cut her off now embraced not only her message from Jesus, but her as she delivered it to them.¹⁰

Or how about the Gerasene demoniac, a man so cut off from human contact that he lives among the tombs outside the village – in other words, his only contact with other human beings is through names and dates chiseled into stone. But Jesus draws near to him in his isolation and loneliness and sickness – and not only does He heal him of his unclean spirit, but Jesus heals for him that isolation and loneliness. Jesus sends him back to the village which had cast him out – and there he is received with amazement and gladness, and restored to human fellowship.¹¹ Or how about Zacchaeus, who is the epitome of the person who has gotten everything he ever wanted and nothing that he truly needed. No one likes Zacchaeus. No one talks to Zacchaeus except to complain about him behind his back. This lonely, little man has managed to cut himself off from all normal human fellowship. And yet Jesus seeks him out, befriends him, dines at his house – and restores Zacchaeus not just from his sins, but also from his shunning. He restores Zacchaeus to the fellowship of the faithful.¹² Again and again we see this in the Gospels – Jesus working to overcome not only our separation from God, but also our separation from one another.

And the writings of Paul about Jesus to the Church are full of this same thing. In fact, every single letter of Paul seems to have these same two themes: how God has enabled us to reenter into loving fellowship with Him through the grace of Jesus; and how that same grace also enables us to reenter into loving fellowship with one another – to have our loneliness and isolation overcome by that great and extraordinary gift which is the Body of Christ, which is the Church. The Church is not only God's way of binding us all to Himself, but also of binding us all one to another in His divine overflow of love. So that now, in Christ, no one need be alone ever again; so that now no one need ever again feel forgotten; so that now all God's children will have a place

where they belong, a people to whom they belong, a family of God where we belong to one another and have fellowship with one another.

And that's pretty much what Paul is writing about in his letter to the Philippians this morning – how God has given us one another in the Body of Christ, because it is not good for us to be alone. Paul doesn't have anything theological to say about this this morning – but then, over these last several months we have heard Paul say a lot of theological things about God's plan to unite us all in one family in Jesus, and about how we are to get along with one another in that family. But this morning it is not something theological Paul is expressing; it is something very personal – near and dear to his own heart. Remember Paul is in prison in Rome – and prison then as prison now can be a very lonely place. But Paul is not feeling alone – not at all. For with him in Rome is Timothy, his companion in ministry, whom he loves like a father loves his son. And also Epaphroditus, whom the Philippians themselves had sent to be with Paul, bearing gifts from them to help sustain Paul through his imprisonment. Even in prison, the Body of Christ is present with Paul.

And this morning what Paul is writing to the Philippians, and saying also to us, is just simply how wonderful, how blessed, how lifesaving it has been for him to have these two fellow Christians and co-workers with him in Rome. He tells them that he hopes to send Timothy to them soon, once he sees how this is all going to turn out. And he tells them he is sending Epaphroditus right away, because he knows how much they miss him and how much he is missing them. In fact, it is likely that Epaphroditus is the one who delivers this very Letter to the Philippians to the Philippians. But, again, what we most hear Paul saying this morning is how having these two co-workers in Christ with him has made all the difference to him in his imprisonment – he has not been alone. We hear Paul giving what amounts to a personal testimony to how good it is to be a part of the Body of Christ, the Church, in which God has made it so that always have others, so that we need never be alone, especially in times of trouble:

*By yourself you're unprotected.
With a friend you can face the worst.
Can you round up a third?
A three-stranded rope isn't easily snapped.*

So, what then are we to take from this, all of this, this morning? Two things, I think. First, like Paul, that we too should consider what a profoundly good gift God has given us in surrounding us with so many good and fellow Christians in this Body of Christ, this Easley Presbyterian Church. Like Paul, for just a moment, let us think over and celebrate what these people around us this morning truly mean to us. Oh, we're not perfect at any of this fellowship business, by any means. We are both as flawed and as God-anointed as any part of the Body of Christ. But time after time I have seen it here, in this fellowship, this family – how you take care of each other in time of need. I watch every Sunday how you greet one another with genuine warmth and affection. I have observed many of you even going out of your way to welcome the stranger, the lonely soul, the person sitting alone. Brothers and sisters in Christ, let us, like Paul, for just a moment think about how special this is, this bond of fellowship, these ties which bind our hearts in Christian love here in this fellowship – it is no small blessing from God!

And second, I think what we can draw from Paul's testimony this morning is the importance, the motivation, the commitment never to take this fellowship for granted. But instead to renew our commitment to one another continually, our commitment to be co-workers with one another in Christ. Because, the truth is, not one of us is strong enough, good enough, to be a Christian all on our own. We need each other if we are going to be of any use to Jesus, if we are going to turn out to be anything at all like what Jesus wants us to be becoming.

One of my favorite Martin Luther King, Jr. sermons is a sermon entitled, "Why Jesus Called a Man a Fool". The text is the parable Jesus told of a rich man forgetting about God and thinking he was a self-made man in his dream of building new and even bigger silos to store up all his new-found wealth. And God does indeed call this man a fool in this parable. King points out in his sermon that God calls this man a fool not just because he has forgotten God, but also because he has forgotten those whom God has placed around him, who have been instrumental to his success:

This man was a fool because he failed to realize his dependence on others. Now, if you read that parable in the book of Luke, you will discover that this man utters about sixty words. And do you know in sixty words he said 'I' or 'my' more than fifteen times? This man was a fool because he said 'I' and 'my' so much until he lost the capacity to say 'we' and 'our.' He failed to realize that he couldn't do anything by himself . . . And oh my friends, I don't want you to forget it. No matter where you are today, somebody helped you to get there."¹³

And that, I think, is the second thing we take from Paul's letter today. First, simply that we rejoice, as Paul rejoices, in this gift God has given us of our membership in the Body of Christ, this gift of fellowship with our co-workers in Christ, this family of God here at E.P.C. And second, that we never become so foolish as to forget, or even worse forsake, this precious gift which the Lord has given – but renew our commitment to making our fellowship, our Christian family, deepen and grow. For it really is "not good" for man to be alone.

¹ Putnam's article, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," was originally published in the January, 1995 edition of the Journal of Democracy. Copies of that article are readily available through an on-line search. Putnam later published a book expanding on his findings: Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

² Richard Weissbourd, et. al, "Loneliness in America: How the Pandemic Has Deepened an Epidemic of Loneliness and What We Can Do About It," accessed on-line at [Loneliness in America: How the Pandemic Has Deepened an Epidemic of Loneliness and What We Can Do About It — Making Caring Common \(harvard.edu\)](https://www.harvard.edu/loneliness-in-america) .

³ Genesis 2:18.

⁴ Genesis 2:23.

⁵ Genesis 12:1-3.

⁶ Exodus 20-23.

⁷ Leviticus 19:18 (9-18).

⁸ Eugene H. Peterson, The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), p. 1169.

⁹ Matthew 4:12-22, Luke 6:12-16.

¹⁰ John 4:1-42.

¹¹ Mark 5:1-20.

¹² Luke 19:1-10.

¹³ Martin Luther King, Jr., A Knock at Midnight, eds. Clayborne Carson & Peter Holloran (New York: Warner Books, 1998), pp. 151-152.