

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces  
Between stars—on stars where no human race is.  
I have it in me so much nearer home  
To scare myself with my own desert places.

*(from "Desert Places" by Robert Frost)*

Our desert places... Our empty and deserted places of the soul. This is true loneliness, when even our own company is no comfort to us. When especially our own company is no comfort to us. We're all occasional visitors to that place. Some of us visit it more frequently and stay there longer. And some of us, I dare say, have taken up residence there, in that desert place where no friendly green things grow, where the landscape is harsh and nothing offers shade from the glare of our aloneness and the life-giving water that we crave is nowhere to be found.

We first know loneliness when, as infants, we cry for our mother and she doesn't come to us. Maybe she's trying to teach us to sleep through the night. Maybe she's just too tired. I don't think we ever really get over this first experience of helplessness and aloneness, this fear of being cut off from the source of what we must have to survive. Twins, born prematurely, who are failing in their separate incubators in the neo-natal intensive care unit, when they put together in the same layette, begin to thrive. Such is the animal nature of human beings. We crave touch, warmth, closeness.

Whether we shared the womb with one or more siblings or not, the experience of birth is, I would imagine, a terrifying departure from the known to the unknown, and a journey we all take alone. As with death. Entering and leaving life, arguably the two most significant events in a lifetime, are passages that must be made alone. No matter how many kind and loving hands and faces surround us, no one can accompany us in birth or death. And in between, are we any less alone?

No one can truly see through our eyes, experience the world as we do. No one can really share our thoughts. And most of the time, we probably wouldn't have it any other way. But every once in awhile, the truth of our impenetrable and essential isolation may strike us like a dagger. At times of extreme stress, for example... when a loved one is in the hospital, or we ourselves are reminded of the inevitability of our mortality. Or when we find ourselves in an unfamiliar and threatening environment... when we leave for college, or break up with a partner and suddenly have no one sharing our bed. It's at these moments that we all know what is to be lonely.

But, while loneliness may be a universal human experience, it's not an uncomplicated one and it's not always what it seems.

There's the kind of loneliness that's actually boredom. We feel we need the company of others when what we really need is entertainment or distraction. Being with other people at such times is one solution, of course, but not the only one. It may be that

we need to start exercising our inner resources and learn to enjoy our own company – not because this is morally preferable to relying on others, but because it’s practical. I’m sure we all know people who cannot stand to be alone because they think they’ll die of boredom. Boredom can lead to anxiety and even panic. This is a danger that we can do something about. We can learn to be alone and to enjoy it by discovering how to entertain ourselves. I remember talking to a man who had recently stopped drinking. He didn’t know what to do with himself. He didn’t read, or enjoy hobbies or work or family. Alcohol had been his only entertainment, his only company. I worry about him to this day. He had never learned to be alone; to be good company for himself.

There’s the kind of loneliness that’s an intense longing for a particular person. Friends can help at a time like this, as can a long, honest cry. This is the loneliness of the broken heart and is the topic for another sermon.

Then there’s the loneliness of feeling different – a kind of loneliness that most of us remember all too well from childhood and adolescence and some of us never do entirely escape. This is the loneliness of the kid who gets picked last when it’s time to choose up teams. We need to belong – to a family, a social group, a work group, a church. Or most of us do. Belonging provides us company, of course, but more than that, it assures us that we’re “all right.” The fear of ostracism is powerful, if seldom named as such.

Fear of this kind of loneliness may lead us into all kinds of dangerous situations as children. We accept foolish dares, ignore bullies or even join in the bullying, learn to keep our mouths shut when we should speak up for ourselves or others. It only gets worse when we become teenagers. Remember junior high? Let’s all give a collective shudder.

This kind of desperate need for validation takes on more subtle guises in adulthood. The fear of being found unacceptable and cast out of the group is the reason for how many marriages, let alone how many unwise romances? We may think we need to marry and have families because we don’t want to be lonely, when our deeper fear is of exposing ourselves as undesirables, misfits. And those of us who do remain single, or who become single through divorce or death do, in fact, bear a stigma. There must be something wrong with us if we go alone to the movies or order a table for one in a restaurant. This is the loneliness of fear... Fear of being found out to be the true weirdoes that we secretly know ourselves to be. The problem with this kind of loneliness, which is really the shame of being alone, is that it keeps us from having fun.

I remember spending a week traveling alone in France, several years ago. For the first two days, I was so self-conscious about being alone, I imagined everyone was looking at me and wondering, “What’s the matter with *her*?” I’m not sure if I stopped thinking I was being gaped at or whether I just stopped caring. At any rate, I did start to appreciate the freedom of solitary travel, of going where you want, when you want, with no one to answer to. I came to enjoy the pleasure of my solitude.

But the fear of being shunned is getting closer to what I would call true loneliness. Not the loneliness of feeling helpless or abandoned; not the loneliness of boredom; not the loneliness of the broken heart, nor the loneliness of not fitting in... not quite. True loneliness, I believe, the kind of loneliness that cuts deepest, the loneliness of the desert, is the loneliness that comes from knowing – or suspecting -- that if anyone really knew us... really knew just how undeserving of love we were, then we would be condemned to wander in that desert forever... alone.

Now, some of this feeling may be realistic. We all harbor thoughts that we're just as glad no one else is privy to. At least, I think we do. Or is that just me? I had a friend in college who thought it would be wonderful if we all could read each other's thoughts. To me, that would be a living hell.

But the shame of knowing we are, perhaps, less admirable than the selves we present to the world is somewhat lessened when we realize that we're not alone in this. If we're unlovable because of thoughts we find unacceptable – feelings of envy, petty resentments, selfishness, undeservedly harsh judgments of others, impatience, or worse – much worse -- so is everyone else. Knowing this removes some of our shame, restores some perspective and even humor about our own shortcomings, and points to a way out of the desert.

But what about those times when we've really opened up, really exposed our inner selves... and the trusted person who is supposed to have been listening just doesn't get it? Doesn't get what we're trying to express... Doesn't get *us*.

This is the kind of loneliness that's so common, and so devastating, within intimate relationships. We try to reach, to touch... and find that there is a barrier between us and the one we love, a barrier that cannot be penetrated. Because, although empathy grows between us and our beloved, and we can indeed sometimes seem to read one another's thoughts, there is a limit to intimacy that cannot, finally, be breached. The total merging with another human being that was experienced with our mothers when we were infants is not to be regained. And this is a tragic and painful fact of life.

This is when the artist turns to nonverbal communication and the writer to an imaginary ideal reader; the child turns to an imaginary friend. Some of us fall into anger and depression; others are able to shrug it off; and the religious person turns to God. God as the ultimate parent and ideal lover, the one who understands all, sees us to the very bottom of our souls, and loves us anyway.

And those of us who cannot believe in the existence of a supreme being with whom we can enjoy a personal relationship? Where can we turn?

Only inward. We can, and must, look into our own hearts for that understanding, that acceptance and forgiveness... that love.

Some people seem to have a natural gift for self-acceptance. Others of us have to learn it. But the kind of spiritual wholeness, the communion with one's own soul, is certainly something that we learn only over time and after many dark nights and lonely, fearful days. It doesn't come to those who have never needed it. Learning to be your own soul-mate is for grownups.

Now, there's no replacement for finding a soul-mate in another person. That is a wonderful thing... a miracle, even... but that's something else, and not everyone is so lucky. And even soul-mates leave us alone, eventually, through death if not by choice. But once you've found your inner soul-mate, once you've connected with your own spiritual being, whether in the form of a god or in the form of the sacred within yourself – that can never be taken away. It's not true that you'll never be lonely again. But once you've decided to be your own spiritual companion, your times in the desert will be briefer and less frightening. You will have the certainty that there is a way out, and that the way out lies within and through yourself.

It is my hope that being together, here, in this congregation, can help us all get closer to discovering that kind of self-reliance. It's a paradox that by turning outward, we become more inwardly mature. It's often said that you can't love someone else until you've learned to love yourself. I actually think it's the other way around. Learning to love others, with all their faults, learning not only to forgive but even appreciate the failings of others, makes us better able to love life. And loving life and loving yourself, loving and caring for your own soul, are really the same thing. You can't do one without the other.

To leave your loneliness

panting behind you on some street corner

while you float free into a cloud of sudden azaleas,

pink petals that have never felt loneliness,

no matter how slowly they fell. (*from "The Rider" by Naomi Shihab Nye*)

To leave your loneliness panting behind you on some street corner while you float free into a cloud of sudden azaleas... This is to fall in love with life again... With God... with yourself. The desert or a cloud of sudden azaleas... We know them both. May this church and what we do here together help us all to imagine, to see, to feel that soft, fragrant and lovely cloud...to float free into those pink petals that have never felt loneliness, no matter how slowly they fell.