

"Radical Resilience: As a Village"

Rev. Greg Watling

First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

Sunday, September 22, 2024

Texts: Romans 12: 1-21 and Galatians 6: 1-10

Loneliness is a neurotoxin, and it's spreading. In 2023, US surgeon general Vivek Murthy issued a national advisory on what he calls an "epidemic of loneliness and isolation," warning that if we fail to build stronger social connections, the country "will pay an ever-increasing price in the form of our individual and collective health" (Jamil Zaki, *Hope for Cynics: The Surprising Science of Human Goodness*, p99). We've known for generations that strong community ties are needed in order to stay resilient. We know, "it takes a village to survive" (Dr. Barbara Holmes, *Daily Meditations: A Collective Response*, Center for Action and Contemplation, January 3, 2024). To get "radical" in our resilience, we need to get to the root of the problem and then search for solutions for our own good, and for the good of our community and nation.

Dr. Barbara Holmes, in her reflection for *Daily Meditations* from the Center for Action and Contemplation notes that even though we know a village is needed, "for many of us, villages are a thing of the past. We no longer draw our water from the village well or share the chores of barn raising, sowing, and harvesting. We can get ... almost anything we need online. Yet even though our societies are connected by technology, the rule of law, and a global economy, our relationships are deeply rooted in the memory of local spaces" (*Daily Meditations*, January 3, 2024). Dr. Holmes continues,

Villages are organizational spaces that hold our collective beginnings. They're spaces that we can return to, if only through memory, when we are in need of welcoming and familiar places. What is a village but a local group of folks who share experiences, values and mutual support in common? I'm using the word "village" to invoke similar spiritual and tribal commitments and obligations ... When there is a crisis, it takes a village to survive. Are villages gone? Do we no longer have those spaces of welcome, tribal commitments and obligations? What happens when there is a crisis?

Jamil Zaki, in his book *Hope for Cynics: The Surprising Science of Human Goodness*, relates that in 1990, just 3 percent of American men reported having zero close friends. In 2021, 15 percent couldn't name any -- a five fivefold increase in just two decades. And not to be left out, the trend was nearly as sharp for women. Adolescent loneliness is climbing even faster. In a survey spanning thirty-seven countries, nearly twice as many teens reported feeling lonely in 2018 compared to just six years before.

He continues, "Loneliness intensifies depression, disrupts sleep, quickens cellular aging, and makes it harder to bounce back from stress. It even worsens the common cold...lonely people tend to die earlier. In one mega study of more than three hundred thousand older adults, severe loneliness increased mortality risk as much as smoking fifteen cigarettes a day, drinking heavily, or not exercising. In your twilight years, the science suggests, you might be better off boozing, smoking, and carousing into the night with friends and family rather than drinking tea and power walking alone (Zaki, p98-99).

Zaki goes on to talk about how cynicism plays an underappreciated role in the effects of loneliness, but I'll leave you to read the book for more on that. I don't think I have to spend a

lot of time convincing you that we're lonely -- yes, even some or many of us here this morning -- and we're surrounded by people much of the time. It made sense to us to feel lonely and isolated during the Covid-19 pandemic, but now we think we're back to "normal" only to find out the research doesn't back up that claim.

So what do we need? For what I've studied, and lived, we need community. Not just a bunch of people around, but we need those 3-5 ish close friends with whom we can share our struggles and our celebrations, our worries and our hopes, our strengths and our weaknesses. Instead, we've settled for community based in social media, somehow believing that it's the same thing to "like" something on social media as it is to sit down at the table and talk about what's really going on with someone we can trust.

I remember as a kid my mother was very close to our neighbor across the street, Ann. We all were close to her as she was our babysitter at times, and for me, she was home at the end of the school day so I'd go to her house until Mom got home. She kept an eye on us, not as nosy neighbor, but as someone who cared about us. Her grandkids were good friends of mine and were part of a neighborhood fabric where most people knew each other, but where there were three or four neighbors that were really close to each other. Maybe you have a similar memory. Maybe you do that now? But I know that for Mom, Ann was an important part of her life and they helped one another through a variety of crises, and celebrated great times together.

In another story, a long-time friend with whom I haven't had a lot of contact, other than a visit to our house a year or so ago, sent Cindy and I a letter this week. She said she has

another friend, a pen-pal (remember those?) with whom she communicates regularly. The letter went on to talk about her life -- and not just the superficial -- but about struggle and triumph, work and rest, wonderful ups and yes, some downs. She reminded me that this, too, is a lost art for many of us. We don't all need to start being pen pals, but perhaps we find something deeper than the casual conversation about the weather or the social media "like" button.

Dr. Holmes tells us that in each generation, we are tested. Will we love our neighbors as ourselves, or will we measure our responsibilities to one another in accordance with whomever we deem to be in or out of our social circles? And what of those unexpected moments of crisis, those critical events that place an entire village at risk? How do we survive together? How do we resist together? How do we respond to unspeakable brutality and the collective oppression of our neighbors?

She then says to us that "there's a way in which we can come together as groups, as collectives, as individuals, and seek the highest good of all of us by using our gifts creatively." And that leads me to scripture, for the Apostle Paul calls on us to use our gifts for each of us are gifted differently. I would add that in a village you need all different kinds of people -- and it's true in your village as well. You may name them differently, but when I think of my needed village, it includes those who are my family for sure, but outside of my family I need people who listen intently. I also need people who challenge me when my thinking holds me back. I need people to gather around me when life hands me struggle and sadness. I also need people who like to do some of the things I like to do. They can be all different people, or

some people who are part of my village in many different ways.

But no matter how you slice it, the cure for loneliness and another tool for radical resilience includes a village. But Dr. Holmes challenges us with the idea that we have a role to play in the village, too. "We have a responsibility to respond to the suffering of others around us. But first, we have to figure out who we are, how we're going to show up, and how we're going to work with others, our neighbors, in communal response." We can spend all day talking about what and who we need in our lives, but I think she's right that we also must think about how we show up.

At the end of the day, I think one of the best representatives of a village can be a local church. It can be people like you and me who gather here and outside of here, in person and virtually, to provide love and support to one another to aid in each other's resilience. When the church operates as a healthy, whole, village, it can do more than just care for its own people. That church can be "a city on a hill" for a community desperate for a remedy for loneliness, isolation, and yes, cynicism that is destroying the fabric of the nation. We can be what perhaps most other communities cannot be, for we are based in something more than ourselves. We are based in a living, loving Source of All that is greater than anything or anyone humanity can produce. We are people of God, rooted in something greater than ourselves who knows exactly what is needed in a situation.

Becoming a village, though, is a tall order. It's not just being friendly, or having nice music, or a good pastor, or great fellowship treats. Becoming a village requires the ability for participants to find the tribe or the group of people with whom they can be authentic and real. No, it won't be one big kum-bah-yah group. Instead, we can make ourselves available -- better said we can put ourselves out there -- and find those with whom we most deeply

resonate. We can find our Ann -- or a couple of them -- and feel a place to belong. Most of all, we can work together to have this community have more depth than what anyone can find on a social media site. Church can be something more than just a collective group who gathers for an hour, celebrating only it's past, and talking about the weather. We can be the place where someone finds what so many are lacking.

It truly takes a village. Many of us have forgotten how to be that village. But it doesn't mean we can't learn or re-learn how to do it. It takes each of us and all of us to bring our best gifts forward knowing that we have what someone else doesn't and vice-versa. It's together that we can be resilient in the face of a nation coming apart at the seams. We can be a beacon of hope. We can be what the world needs right now. We can be a village. If we so choose, and if we act that way.

In Christ. Amen.