
Loneliness in a Crowd

A few years ago, I had some business at the University of Toronto which is located near the downtown of the city. In a very small area, there are hundreds of thousands of people and during a normal day the sidewalks are full of people of all ages and ethnicities. As I walked along the sidewalk, I noticed that most of the people, while they did not avert their eyes, did not meet my gaze. For the main part, it was as if I didn't exist. This, apparently, is not unique to Toronto. Some have told me that they have had a similar experience in Calgary. Even though there may be hundreds of people around, there is very little interaction with anyone.

One of the biggest problems facing people today is the problem of loneliness, and although it is counterintuitive, that problem becomes greater in settings where there are more people. We can understand why feelings of loneliness might arise if someone is living in an unpopulated area of the prairie, for there is no one else to talk to. However, to feel lonely on a city street where there are tens of thousands of people around doesn't seem possible. In fact, we might feel more lonely in the midst of people than we would if we were in a remote location. When we are alone, loneliness comes as no surprise; when we are with others but have no interaction with them, it seems unnatural.

I have known people who say they are never more lonely than when they come to church service. This seems odd because, after all, when we gather for worship, we are with people who are of like mind and who have the same goal, namely serving Jesus Christ. Still, those who have told me of their loneliness say that while they are sitting in the pew, they sit alone, and the awareness that most other people have someone else makes them more aware of their own situation. And it's not only single people who have said this. I have also heard the same from families who feel very lonely when they gather with the rest of the congregation. Perhaps the loneliness is accentuated by the fact that there is an expectation when we gather with God's people that we will be welcomed as one would welcome a beloved member of the family, and when our experience is otherwise, we are shocked.

Some years ago, while living for a short time in a small city, I began to attend a church in that community, and my initial experience was wonderful. Someone immediately perceived that I was new to the church, and they came over to me with a smile and a welcome. They asked who I was, and they seemed to be genuinely happy that I was there. I felt welcome. A friend also attended that church with his family, and when I shared my experience with him, he became a little cynical: they are friendly, he said, but they do not want to become your friends. What he meant was that the church did its best to make him and his family feel welcome, but the relationship never went beyond that. They were never invited into the lives of others, and the feelings of loneliness grew, even as they were surrounded by smiling, welcoming people.

There are a number of biblical images of the church, but the one that addresses the problem of loneliness most fully is the image of the church being the family of God. We are brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. A few weeks ago, as a family we travelled back to Ontario where we spent time with family and friends. It was good to be with friends again, but it was more meaningful that we were with family. With family, we

felt we belonged, and while our family is not perfect, it is where we felt welcome. This is what the church is meant to be. True, there are families where the members do not get along, and there may be feelings of loneliness even when with family. But, if we think about healthy families, we can see how the church, if it functions like a healthy family should, can be a place where there is no loneliness.

The church has been designated to be the family of God. By definition, when we put our faith in Jesus Christ, every other Christian in the world becomes our brother or sister. But being something by definition might not mean that we experience the reality. In other words, we are expected to cultivate that which we are. It takes effort and intention to treat each other as brothers and sisters. To that end, let me suggest two questions that we should ask of ourselves as we live out our role as children of God:

First, am I doing anything that might make others feel excluded? Groups of friends can become cliques, and cliques tend toward excluding most people while including just a select few. Being friendly without the expectation of making friends is a way of pushing people away rather than drawing them in.

Second, are we intentional about including others. Just because someone might be sitting among us does not mean they are with us. To include others is to open our lives to them. This is more than just having a simple conversation; to include means that we fellowship with them on a deeper level than just saying hi.

God did not create us to be lonely. He created us to be in community with each other, and the church, representing the restored creation, is meant to be a place where there is no loneliness. May it be that there is no loneliness among us.

Pastor Gary