

Minister for Loneliness; (Pre)Series: Where Jesus Goes, We Follow

Mark 10:35-45

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A few weeks ago on the CBC, I heard a passing reference to a newly appointed minister in the United Kingdom. They have now appointed a Minister for Loneliness.

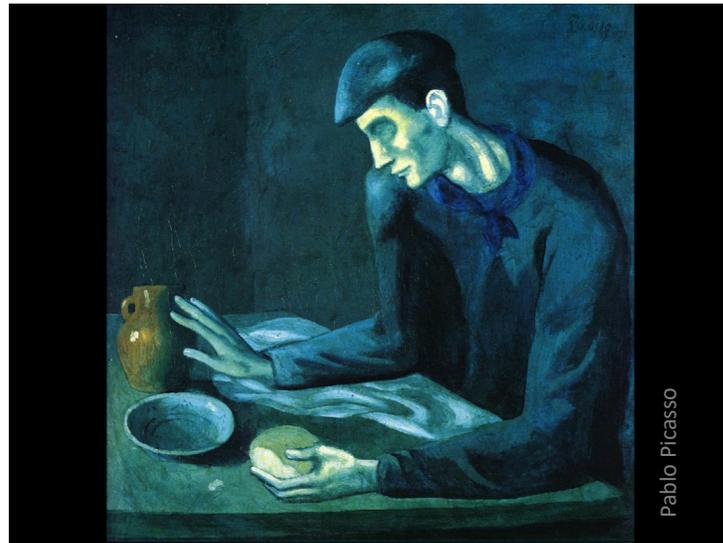


Tracey Crouch was just given this position within Prime Minister Theresa May's government on January 16 as a part of the acknowledgement of the findings of a recent study – findings that 9 million people in the United Kingdom are, in some way, shape, or form, lonely. That's 14% of the population. The study found that loneliness does not just affect older people, but people of all ages and walks of life: the elderly, certainly, but also those who care for elderly or disabled relatives; teens; new parents; refugees; etc. In one of the articles I read, it was suggested that social isolation is detrimental to one's physical health and that it could be worse than smoking fifteen cigarettes a day. Ms. Crouch is going to be keeping loneliness on the radar of the government, seeking funding to combat the problem, developing initiatives and programs, etc. She admits that this is a 'phenomenal' challenge. We're not going to solve this problem overnight, or even within the next twelve months, she said.¹

And I think she's quite right about that. Loneliness has been with us since the beginning of time. Perhaps it is increasing now – or our awareness of it and naming of it is increasing –

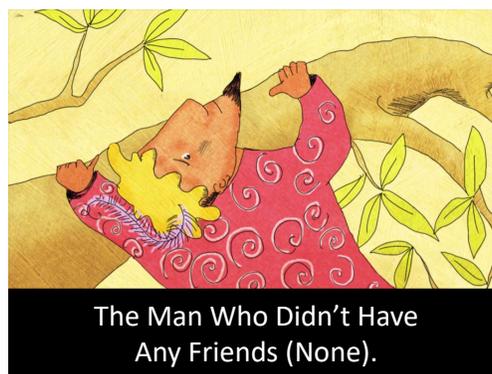
¹ <https://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/news/campaigns/the-big-interview-loneliness-minister-tracey-crouch-on-the-phenomenal-challenge-ahead-1-8991983>

with the aging population... with the increase of socially isolating technologies... with the prevalence of depression. One might think that with more and more people in this world and with more and more means of staying connected to people, we would be less lonely... but that is not the case. Loneliness is and loneliness was and loneliness is to come.



And the loneliness of humanity – the isolation of humanity – the disconnection of humanity from God, from one another – well, this is arguably the reason that Jesus came. In our text for this morning, we read that Jesus came to serve and to give his life. When Jesus says why he came, we should perk our ears and pay attention. Jesus came, he says, to serve. He came as the truest Minister for Loneliness. He came to serve – the isolated – the outcast – the marginalized – the lonely. He came to bring hope to the suicidal teen... to the frightened refugee... to the forgotten community... to the traumatized victim... to the abused child...

The Jesus Storybook Bible highlights loneliness when it calls the story of Zacchaeus, “The Man Who Didn’t have Any Friends (None)”.



In this very story, Jesus also says why he came: The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost. (Luke 19:10). The least. The last. The littlest. The lonely. The left out. The Zacchaeuses... the ones who didn't have any friends. None. Jesus befriended Zacchaeus. And it is interesting to note that after spending time with Jesus, Zacchaeus was inspired to make right what he had done wrong. Zacchaeus was a rich man who had become rich by stealing from others in the form of corrupt taxation. And after spending time with Jesus, Zacchaeus wanted to make things right. And he made things right – paying people back four times what he had stolen. One might say of him that he caught the spirit of Matthew 5:6 – “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be filled.” After an afternoon being filled by Jesus, Zacchaeus developed a new hunger – not a hunger for riches, not even so much a hunger for friends – but a hunger to do what was right and a hunger to make things right.

All this to say that in a world that needed and still needs a hungering after justice, the sons of Zebedee, here in Mark 10, are hungering after the wrong thing. They were hungering after power, prestige, and honour. In a world that needed people to stand in solidarity with the least, the last, the lost, the littlest, the left out, the lonely... in a world that needed ministers for loneliness, James and John were looking for a place to stand that was above and removed from others.

We can see from how many times the disciples argued about who was the greatest, that the hunger for power and prestige and honour is a really difficult propensity/habit from which to break free. And that hunger doesn't always have to look fierce and ferocious. Sometimes our hunger for power and honour and authority looks quite righteous and holy.

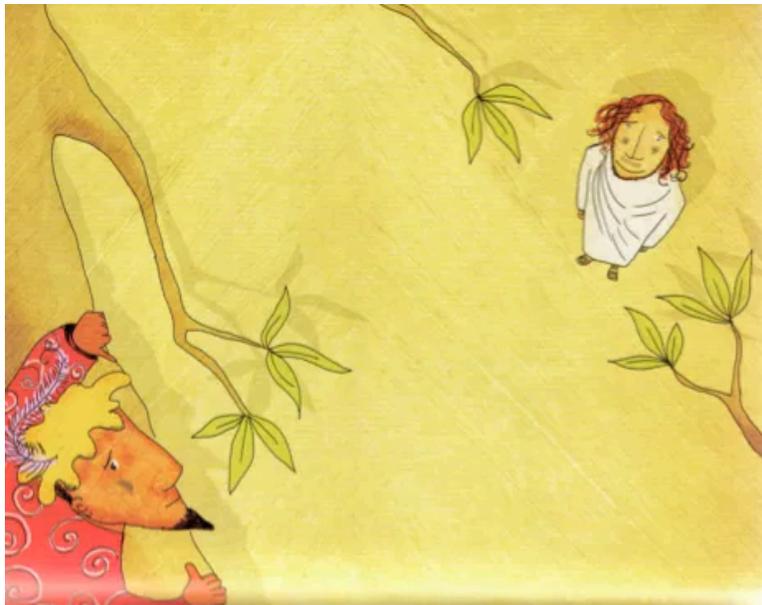
Scott Hoezee says,

At its worst, the yen for the limelight is selfish pride on our part, pure and simple. But sometimes our motives are a bit purer, a bit more noble (or at least we can make it sound noble). After all, wouldn't grabbing the reins of power for ourselves be a great way to influence the world for good? Think of how much kingdom work we could accomplish if WE were the ones passing the laws or adjudicating court cases. Just imagine all the bad behavior we could stamp out if the right people had the muscle to act as this nation's moral cops. Sometimes having some authority to lord over others may just be the way to go!²

² http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-24b/?type=the_lectionary_gospel

This is a tempting way to sugar coat our hunger for power and position... But let Gandalf's words be a warning to us... In *The Fellowship Of the Ring*, Frodo has been given a powerful ring – a ring he must destroy. The great wizard, Gandalf, says, 'you must use such strength and heart and wits as you have.' And Frodo says, "But I have so little of any of these things! You are wise and powerful. Will you not take the Ring?" And Gandalf says, "No! With that power I shall have power too great and terrible. And over me the Ring would gain a power still greater and more deadly. Do not tempt me! ... Yet the way of the Ring to my heart is by pity, pity for weakness and the desire of strength do good. Do not tempt me! I dare not take it, not even to keep it safe and unused. The wish to wield it would be too great for my strength" (J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, p. 70-71).

The power that we seek, even to do good, can so quickly turn into a power that corrupts and destroys. To counteract that, we must heed, not only the words of Gandalf, but especially the words of Christ who says, "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all" (Mark 10:43-44).



We all have some form of power... some of us have significant power in the systems and structures of the world and of the church. But that power is going to do the most and best work in the kingdom when it is exercised in conformity to the humility of Christ, who, as powerful as he was, was always reaching, as Hoezee writes, for the bottom rung of the ladder.

What does it look like to be a servant of all? What is the call here? What does it feel like to hunger after justice? Especially when there is so much injustice in this world? A couple of thoughts here. First of all, there is a call to small acts of love. These small acts of love and service are part of putting the world aright. One of the articles I read about the loneliness epidemic in the UK said, “Loneliness may be assuaged by something as simple as a friendly word at the check-out counter from a cashier empathetic enough to recognize its symptoms. (Be patient: the chatty retiree holding up the line may be having his first conversation in days.)” Your simple acts of kindness could change someone’s life. So – yes to simple, small acts of kindness.

AND, the work of justice... the hunger for justice... calls us toward advocating for all of our institutions to work appropriately to fight systemic injustice. Cups and of tea and chats in the grocery lines are certainly well and good, AND it is also true that there are systems in place that need challenging in order to pave the way for the breaking through of shalom.

Many of us have experienced an injustice recently when it came to our application for funding for a summer jobs student – having to attest to something that would violate our convictions about the rights of unborn children. It makes sense for Christians to push back on this. In another case, the Christian Reformed Centre for Public Dialogue has drafted a letter that some of us may want to sign and send to our member of parliament with respect to First Nations children not receiving the same amount of services and funding as those children who are not First Nations. Let me know if you’d like a copy. It makes sense for Christians to push for our government to treat the people of this land justly – with respect to religious rights and freedoms and with respect to the fair treatment of all peoples.

There are any number of injustices – global and local – that we can put our energy toward. Martin Luther King, Jr. said over and over again, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” I believe the reverse is also true... The pursuit of justice anywhere is a holy and divine threat to injustice everywhere. Justice advocate, John Dear, says, “Since all issues of injustice are connected, fighting one injustice puts us squarely in the struggle against every injustice.”³

³ <https://cac.org/blessed-hunger-justice-2018-02-02/>

And finally... in this struggle, we will come up, again and again, against the power of sin and evil that no human effort, individually or communally, can break. This is why Jesus' words at the end of our text are the words we cling to with the most strength. "The Son of Man came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). A ransom in ancient societies was something that one was expected to pay to rescue relatives from debt slavery or from captivity in war.⁴ This is what Jesus came to do – he came to liberate us from the power of sin in our lives. He came to liberate you. He came to liberate me. He came to liberate, not just individuals, but this world from the systemic sins that bind us all!

This week marks the beginning of Lent. And throughout Lent, we're going to be journeying through the book of Mark. I've titled the series Where Jesus Goes, We Follow.



And each Sunday, we'll name many things that follow in the wake of Jesus' movement. Where Jesus goes, questions and accusations follow. Where Jesus goes, crowds follow, cleanliness follows, confusion and quiet follow, celebration follows, commands follow, crucifixion follows. And the question will linger for each of us. Where Jesus goes, will we follow? Will we drink the cup that he drank? Will we serve as he served? Will we hunger and thirst for justice as he did?

⁴ Pheme Perkins, Mark, New Interpreter's Bible, p. 720.

Will we hunger and hope for the justice only he can bring? We'll close with this litany⁵ placing our ultimate hope in Jesus.

Justice and hope. Can these two words really go together? As justice-seekers whose ears are attuned to the voices of marginalized people, where is our hope when the poor are trampled underfoot and it seems that the powerful take the day every time? Where is our hope when even our churches too often turn their faces away?

We have hope because we are not saving the world, Christ is.

We have hope because we get to participate in this heavenly restoration and reconciliation of all things, and though we groan and labour along with creation, we know the ending of the story already. There will be freedom for the prisoners. There will be recovery of sight for the blind. The oppressed will be set free. Good news will be proclaimed to the poor.

And so we work and pray and advocate, entrusting our faithful mustard seeds of love for neighbours to a faithful God.

As we walk with Christ toward the cross this Lent, we walk with our marginalized neighbours, knowing with them that after the cross comes the empty tomb.

⁵ <https://www.crcna.org/publicdialogue/resources/justice-and-hope-sunday>