

On a scale of 1-10, how lonely are you?

A recent survey of American adults found that nearly half say we feel alone "sometimes" or "always", and almost the same number report feeling left out. A little more than 4 in 10 feel their relationships aren't meaningful and feel isolated from others. Only half say they have meaningful in-person interactions like long conversations or quality time with family on a daily basis.

Psychologists have begun to refer to America's loneliness epidemic. And it's a big deal: people who are lonely don't sleep as well. We suffer dips in our ability to reason *and* be creative - which means loneliness impacts both sides of our brain. We're less satisfied at work, and there's a strong correlation between loneliness and mental health issues like anxiety, depression and suicide. Loneliness has even been linked to poor cardiovascular health.

In other words, it's pretty safe to say we weren't created to be alone. Our bodies, minds and spirit suffer when we're alone. This loneliness epidemic isn't just in our heads. Regardless of race, gender or class, we're all lonelier today than we were a generation ago. And surprisingly, becoming a more connected world has *hurt* rather than helped. Studies have shown that loneliness increases the more often people on mobile devices and social media.

The reality for most of us today is that we're surrounded by people, more connected than ever in human history, and yet we feel isolated, alone and unloved.

We weren't created to be alone. In fact, just after God created the first human, God said, "It's not good for a person to be alone."

We're going to explore the roots of loneliness today, and ask what help our faith can be in curing loneliness not only for ourselves, but for our community. How does God intend the Church to be the cure for the loneliness epidemic?

Message

We're beginning a series today called Catalyst: Together. This is the last sermon series of the church year - Advent begins in December. We've always used this series to take a step back and look at who we are as a church community, and reflect on where God is calling us to go next.

Catalyst turned 13 years old this year, so we're officially a teenager. From the beginning, when we were a house church meeting in living rooms to now, there's been a consistent core vision for who we are:

We want to be a church where it's easy for people who are far from God to connect with Jesus. We want to be really good at removing every barrier between people and God.

Over the last thirteen years, we've employed a model of helping people find God that I want to call an Attractional model. At its core, the attractional model is all about what we do here, right now. Sunday

morning worship. So we've had a big emphasis on excellent music and on great, practical preaching. We often open with a cover song - that's on purpose, so that folks who feel a little nervous about coming to a church building and singing a bunch of songs they don't know feel a little more welcome. We go out of our way to avoid religious language so they don't feel like they need a decoder ring to understand the Good News about Jesus.

We put a lot of emphasis and energy on our Sunday morning worship. Which is good, of course. We love being gathered together by the Spirit as one body to worship God together.

But here's the thing: when you really dig in and ask people what Catalyst is, especially the folks who have been around, it's not Sunday morning they talk about.

Sure, they get there eventually... especially if I'm the one asking. "Oh yeah, Pastor, and the preaching is pretty good, too!"

But what keeps people at Catalyst is the *relationships*. Over and over, as we've asked you, you say, "It's the people. It's the relationships. It's the way I was cared for when I was sick. Or the friends I made in my C-Group. The people who became spiritual parents to me. The people I consider my extended spiritual family."

When we asked, it turned out *relationships* are the core of Catalyst. More than music, more than preaching, more than serving together, it's the relational connections.

So as we look to the future, we're asking, "How do we make *relationships* the focus of what we do here?"

That's not an idle question here. We know that we're doing a lot of things very well. We've gotten good at being attractational, but it's still hard for a lot of newer folks to connect here.

We're good at being friendly, but it's not as easy to make friends as it could be.

And as we look to the future, we believe that God is calling us to center on relationships. To make it really easy to make friends here at Catalyst.

That might strike you as a strange focus for a church. After all, shouldn't a church really be focused on the music and the preaching? Isn't our main goal to be about worshiping God?

That question reveals an assumption on our parts that Christianity is primarily an individual thing. We think that what God cares about most is our vertical relationship - us and God.

But our faith is 3-dimensional. It's not just about us and God... it's about how we relate with each other. Jesus said the greatest commandment is loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength *and* loving our neighbors as ourselves. Faith is not only vertical, it's horizontal.

We're tempted to prioritize these, to say the vertical is more important than the horizontal, but they're two sides of the same coin. Loving God helps us love our neighbors, but loving our neighbors helps us love God too.

If we can get this right, the Church can be the cure for the loneliness epidemic. And that's how we were *designed* to function.

Genesis 1 tells us that God created humans in God's image, and that image, from the beginning, was more than one person. "Male and Female". In the second story, in Genesis 2, God insists, "it's not good that the man is alone." We often make these passages about marriage (which is great, I've read them at a number of weddings I've done), but even more basically, they're about relationships and what makes us human:

One person can't reflect the image of God. I need you and you need me.

Let's pause for a moment and ask what that reality tells us about GOD. If we're essentially relational, and we're created in God's image, that means God is essentially relational.

This is what the doctrine of the Trinity is all about. Beyond all the confusing language about God's three-in-oneness (which can be a very deep rabbit hole that only theology nerds find truly enjoyable), is the confession that when you boil down the infinite creator of the universe to the most essential truth of existence, it's that God is relationship. The Father, the Son and the Spirit, three persons who are one God. Not three individuals who work in the same office. Not one being who fulfills three roles. But three persons who are one being.

God is relational. And we are created in this God's image.

If you want to take it down out of the clouds and make this easy, we could say it like this:

Friendship is the heart of Jesus' Good News.

Again, we want to push back here. The heart of Christianity is Jesus dying for our sins, isn't it?

Well no, not exactly. Why did Jesus die for our sins? As we talked about in our last series, it's all about restoring the relationship between us and God that sin broke. The heart of Christianity is *relationship*.

[**Scripture Slide**] Turn with me to John 15. This is a conversation Jesus is having with his disciples around the meal that would become known as the Communion meal, the Last Supper. Jesus knows he's hours

away from being betrayed by all these people, hours away from his crucifixion. The disciples, of course, are largely clueless.

Jesus specifically addresses his impending crucifixion, but note that he places it in the context of friendship. Let's read, beginning in verse 9:

I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love. When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father's commandments and remain in his love. I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow! This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you slaves, because a master doesn't confide in his slaves. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me. -- John 15:9-15

Jesus warns that we only remain in him if we keep his commandments, but then turns around and deconstructs our fear. What is his command? That we love each other the way he loves us - by giving up our lives for each other.

And then he insists that we are his *friends*. Not his followers. Not his entourage. Not his slaves.

Jesus calls us his friends.

He *made us* his friends by dying for us. And then he says that his *only commandment* is to the same for each other.

When we make friends, we are living out Jesus' commandment. When we make friends, we are doing for others what Jesus did for us.

Maybe the reason we have a hard time believing that friendship is the heart of faith is that we've cheapened friendship.

It's not *just* Facebook's fault, but we're Facebook friends with people we hardly know. We're not involved in their lives. We're not invested in their flourishing. We don't bear them any ill will, but we don't *really* care about them.

Maybe we use the word 'friend' too glibly? Jesus says a friend is a person who loves you enough to lay down their lives for you.

How many of *those* do you have? Someone who always has your best interests at heart, someone who loves you enough to say the hard things you don't want to hear? Someone who is going to have your back no matter what. Someone who makes your life better, someone who's a blessing, not a headache. A person who uses their life to make yours better.

A friend is not an acquaintance at your kid's soccer game. A friend is not an ex you still sort of get along with. A friend is not a coworker you talk *Walking Dead* around the water cooler or commiserate in the corner with at the office Christmas party.

Friendship is when we act like Jesus toward one another. Friendship is when we are good news in each other's lives.

Jesus prayed that we would have this friendship with each other. For Jesus, friendship among God's people is the very way we participate in God's life. After they're finished eating, Jesus prays over his followers - and us. Here's what he prays:

I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me. -- John 17:20-21

Jesus prayed that we would experience the oneness of the Trinity, the perfect unity of the three-in-one. But we experience that *together*.

So in the next phase of Catalyst, we'll be asking how we can become better at making friends here at Catalyst. How can we build on the foundations of welcome we already have to ensure that it's easy for everyone who comes in to be friends? What would it look like for us to be a church where it's easy to make friends?

Catalyst, as we look to the future, it's clear that God is calling us to be what our culture needs. We live in a world of lonely people, people who are more connected than ever, but don't have anyone they can call a true friend.

Jesus has made friends with us so we can make friends with them, and with each other. And as we make friends, we are acting out the very heart of who God is.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus made friends with us so we can be friends with each other.

1. How easy is it to think of God as your friend?
2. When in the last week have friends made a significant impact on your faith?
3. How can you lean into friendships in this next week?
4. What changes this week if you pray to God as your friend *and* Lord?

Assignment + Blessing

Friendship inventory