

**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN  
**CHURCH**



SERMON

May 5, 2024

# All the Lonely People

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: May 5, 2024

To let your hair down seems foolish in a world that confers celebrity status on those who appear to have it all together. Why let your soft edges show?

The resurrection invites us to take that risk.

Jesus humbles himself before the political powers and comes out as the victor on the other side of death.

In the weeks since that celebratory Sunday when Christ glows on Easter morning, to walk in his way of vulnerability seems far-fetched for those of us saddled with debt, taxes, and tuition.

During the season of Eastertide, readings turn us to the Gospel of John on the night of the last supper. Called the Farewell Discourse, over five chapters Jesus addresses the palpable anxiety of his followers at his impending death.

By all accounts, his execution should destroy this band of revolutionaries – at least that’s the political and religious elites’ plan. Their power over him should negate his teachings of love and acceptance. Fear enables those rulers to hold on. Those disciples risked everything – family, trade, social acceptability. To belong to him severed their ties with those rigid communities.

## To whom will they now belong?

Recall the evening. In this crowded room, Jesus strips to the waist, gets on his knees, and performs the humblest task of any servant; he washes their feet.

While the water drips from their toes and intimacy still tingles, Jesus takes his place at the table. Imagine they sit so close to one another that their knees knock. Jesus builds on this visceral sense and describes the way they will remain connected even after the finality of death.

He begins, “In God’s house there are many rooms. Where I am you will be also. Believe in God, believe in me.”

He promises that his death need not disrupt their fellowship nor their growth in this life.

Before I read more of his tender words, please pray with me. *Dear God, Jesus tells us to not let our hearts be troubled and to not be afraid and yet we find both of those true too often. The isolation in the world troubles and teaches us to fear other people. As we come before your word, still us. Soothe us with Jesus’ words so we begin to grasp the gift of being connected to you through him and one another. Amen*

### John 15:9-17

<sup>9</sup>As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. <sup>10</sup>If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. <sup>11</sup>I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

<sup>12</sup>"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup>No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. <sup>14</sup>You are my friends if you do what I command you.

<sup>15</sup>I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing, but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.

<sup>16</sup>You did not choose me, but I chose you.

And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. <sup>17</sup>I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

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Have you ever walked into a room that is elbow to elbow with people and the possibility of a good time? You scan for a familiar face. And find no one you know. Not only do you see a bunch of strangers, those who notice you look away rather than allow eye contact.

If you meet, it may require more than friendliness from them. To welcome another leads to asking a question or two. That same curiosity might come back to bite them if the other person inquires about them. They'd rather not risk their good time to expand their circle to welcome a complete stranger.

Strangers also threaten one's social standing. As the outsider, you first must pass a litmus test of if you are wearing the right clothes, hair and skin color, or move about as normal. Until you've demonstrated your acceptability, you'll feel the icy distance wrapped up in polite nods.

Who wants to be surrounded with others only to end up feeling lonely.

Worse yet, was there a time in your life when you felt trapped at a dinner table, maybe even a family dinner table, and you just wanted to feign illness or prayed for your phone to erupt with an *urgent* call to rescue you so you don't sit through



another meal feeling like an alien. Or be talked over and around as if you are not present.

You carry the shame of the time you revealed something about your passions, relationships, or beliefs and got burned.

You doubt your lovability if the others know that secret you've kept hidden away. The loneliness we feel even among an elbow-to-elbow experience rises from the fear of being judged and rejected. Could there be anything lonelier than feeling afraid or ashamed of being who you are?

Jesus shows us what belonging looks like. Even though belonging is laced through the entirety of the Gospel of John, it's harder to put your finger on it until the end. Jesus connects with people by exposing their vulnerability.

When he encounters a Samaritan woman at a well, a person with a long-despised ethnicity, and reveals her sordid sexual past, it astounds her and everyone else when he welcomes her. He attaches this woman to himself and in doing so restores her sense of dignity. He gives her life.

Jesus removes the stigma from a man born blind so others see this man as a beloved child of God. This man now belongs among the living community.

No one possesses all they need to get by let alone thrive. Jesus erases all those ways we ostracize one another as different or not good enough.

When we see another included and called beloved, with all their differences, implies maybe we too have a place at the table. We too can be vulnerable. We too can bring our whole self.

During Jesus' farewell, he dissolves any barrier by calling his followers "friends," a word rich in meaning as beloved and belonging. Through Jesus, God humbles God's self into this friendship. And from the bonds of this heart-to-heart, he gives us the simple command to love.

The simplicity does not mean it is simple or easy.

Christian faith often gives friendship the short-shrift. In church we talk a lot about love – it compels us in serving and tending those outside of our sanctuaries. But church history, let alone our own diaries and hearts, would seem to suggest that the church finds it as difficult as any other place to actually love one another.

That secular world and culture that threatened Jesus' fellowship continues to chip away at what we might enjoy. We hear culture whisper and shout: don't let others see your weakness.

It takes stamina to sit with another in grief and just let them weep. It takes courage to let down our guard and admit we need prayers. It takes the witness of seeing another in a place of vulnerability who is tended, not judged. It takes those prayers of confession AND Jesus' assurance of grace.

None of these traits come naturally in people.

Jesus invites us to be humble.

We need to remember on the other side of the grave, his body still bore the scars of the cross. Resurrection claimed all of him.

The Resurrection is, about miraculous, unexpected, new life born from injustice and death. And it is about his body experienced by his closest followers. However, Easter isn't primarily about an individual body. Not Jesus' body. And not your body and whatever will happen to you after you die.

Easter is about the birth of a new body, a corporate body of humankind, a community of Resurrection. His church.

Each week as I compose a sermon, I need to google the title, search the Urban Dictionary, and TikTok. You may be surprised at how many titles get ditched because some rap star coined the phrase with a, shall we say, church-inappropriate idea.

I knew this sermon would be about belonging – the ache we all have, even the loners, to connect with another human, to be accepted for who we are. The Beatles must have been playing in my subconscious.

I finally googled “All the Lonely People” and then heard the tune:

Eleanor Rigby

picks up the rice in the church where a wedding had been.

Lives in a dream ...

All the lonely people

Where do they all come from?

All the lonely people

Where do they all belong?

The next verse:

Father McKenzie

Writing the words of a sermon that no one will hear

Ouch ... that stung.

Paul McCartney writes that he knew a lot of old ladies—partly through what was called Bob-a-Job Week, when Scouts did chores. They'd get a shilling for cleaning out a shed or mowing a lawn. McCartney wanted to write a song that would sum them up.

Eleanor Rigby is based on an old lady that I got on with very well. I found out that she lived on her own, so I would go around there and just chat, which is sort of crazy if you think about me being some young Liverpool guy. Later, I would offer to go and get her shopping. She'd give me a list and I'd bring the stuff back, and we'd sit in her kitchen ... So, I would visit, and just hearing her stories enriched my soul and influenced the songs I would later write...

The song itself was consciously written to evoke the subject of loneliness, with the hope that we could get listeners to empathize. <sup>1</sup>

In a culture that feasts on anxiety, we get so caught up in wearing a mask that says, “I’m just fine” to avoid being alone, we keep ourselves from living.

Jesus loves us through the breadth of human life, birth, wedding celebrations, scarcity, estrangement, fear of death, fear of life. It’s why his church continues to invite us to his table to belong.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul McCartney, “Writing “Eleanor Rigby,” How one of the Beatles’ greatest songs came to be.” *The New Yorker*, October 18, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/10/25/paul-mccartney-writing-eleanor-rigby-beatles>





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