

Walk Together: Relieving Our Loneliness

by Stewart Ruch

Bishop Stewart Ruch's sermon emphasizes the critical need for close relationships among Christians to combat loneliness in today's society.

Duration: 26:32

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Ephesians 4:1-3, Ephesians 4:17-19, Ephesians 4:22-27, Ephesians 4:29 - 5:2

Topics: "Loneliness"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of relationships in the Christian faith. He highlights that the Bible is a book about relationship, including our relationship with God and with other believers. The focus of the sermon is on the need for close relationships with fellow Christians. The speaker refers to Ephesians 4, where Paul teaches that we can have close relationships with other believers by bearing with one another in love and maintaining the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Transcript

This is Church of the Resurrection in Wheaton, Illinois. This week's sermon is by Bishop Stuart Ruck and is from the 14th Sunday after Pentecost. As I mentioned, my wife Catherine and I and our six children had the opportunity to spend two and a half months in the nation of Brazil, where Catherine grew up and where her parents are still serving as missionaries, coming into almost their 50th year.

Her brother pastors a church down there. She has a brother who is an opera singer down there. So we had this chance to be in Brazil and to be with family.

And one of the things that we have always loved about Brazil and that I was reminded of in this most recent sojourn is just how profoundly relational the Brazilian people are. It's very easy to say, oh yeah, Brazilians, Latinos, very relational. But to be back immersed in that culture again, it's to realize these people not only have a passion for relationship, they have a passion for friendship.

They're actually looking for ways to constantly and consistently connect and come close to each other. This was displayed in an amazing experience that we had. We were simply trying to turn left onto a very busy highway.

While I love Brazilian people, I hate Brazilian roads and it's crazy. And driving there for me as an American is a constant exercise in stress management and anxiety reduction. It's a horrible thing.

And so we're trying to turn left and it was already a crazy situation. Catherine's in one car ahead of me. I'm the next car.

We're coming out of a gas station. Cars are whizzing back and forth in both lanes. Very, very busy highway.

And then to make things much worse, a beer truck rolls up right next to Catherine who's trying to get out. So now the beer truck is perpendicular to Catherine. She can't see anything out of her left mirror to see what's happening with ongoing traffic.

There was basically at this point no way to get out into the intersection until the beer truck driver jumps out of the cab, sees the situation and goes out into the lane of oncoming traffic realizing Catherine can't get out and stops the traffic, including who he's stopping is one of the city buses, a large city bus with a city bus driver. Now I only have experience with Chicago city bus drivers. This city bus driver stops and realizes, wait a second, that woman is trying to get out and the beer truck driver is trying to help her.

I want in on this. How can I help her? So then they, because he's high up, so they're working it out together. The truck driver and the beer, the bus driver are working together, look at each other.

Whoa, whoa, whoa, kid, don't come yet. Yeah, yeah, you can come slow down, slow down. He's got his hand out the window.

The guy's got his arms like this and they slowly move Catherine out into oncoming traffic safely when she moved into the lane and I move right in after that. They're like, yes, we got her out there. I just, I had an emotional experience.

I mean, I, I felt loved by the beer truck driver and I felt like I was connected. I felt like actually these folks that were involved in this situation were for me. They actually wanted to help me.

I didn't feel lonely. As an American driver, I'm used to the realities of constant competition. American driving is about competing with other drivers all the time.

Who gets in before the other person, right? Who's faster than the other person? Because I need two more minutes that I'm not going to get if I don't speed past you or cut you off. And they were competing. They were actually connected.

There's a really interesting article by an English writer. He published it in the British newspaper, The Guardian two years ago, and he said, every age has a name. The iron age, the stone age.

He said, many call this the digital age, but he was said, no, I would call this the loneliness age. American statistics would bear out that term for our current time. In the 1970s and 80s, Americans were asked, are you lonely? And asked a series of questions around the base question, are you lonely? Over the course of 20 years, 11 to 20% said, yes, I am lonely.

In 2010, the exact same survey was done. Only now the number was 45% of Americans said, I am regularly and acutely lonely. Almost half of our nation of 300 million plus said, that description describes my life.

Research has been done on loneliness by brain scientists. One is at university of Chicago and he's written a report that says acute and regular loneliness increases early death by a factor of 26%. So loneliness is

such a descriptor for so many of us in our culture.

It's a descriptor for the human condition. It's one of the ways to understand what it means that we are sinful beings. Insofar as we live in alien nation, we live in detachment and disconnection from the God who made us for common union and constant union with us and with our fellow human beings, even our fellow Christians that are sinful nature, our sinful condition.

One of the symptoms and one of the lived realities of that sinful condition is that we're deeply lonely. We're deeply solitary. We're profoundly individualized and that has significant effects on our lives.

We were not meant to live that way. We were not made for that. One of the great joys of interacting with other cultures is they have their problems, right? Every culture has its problems.

No perfect culture. They get to trade problems for a while when you're with other cultures, either living there or interacting with other cultures here in the States, which is a great opportunity for us. And one thing you learn about many other cultures is they're just not as deeply lonely.

They actually have an instinct for connection, like the story I described for you this morning. You are made to have very close relationship, especially with other Christians. You're made to live your life within an ecosystem and a network of close, affectionate, harmonious, peace-giving relationship with others.

You're made for that. That's what you're wired for. And when you don't have a chance to step into that and live that and experience that, you have half of a country saying, my existence is lonely.

I want to look at Ephesians chapter 4 with you today and for the next few weeks. I'll be looking at this again next week and then Father Brett on the first Sunday of September. The metaphor that Paul uses in this chapter, and whenever, often when Paul's writing, you got to look at not only the beginning and the end with Paul's teachings, but the middle, okay? So he does a passage, look at the middle.

He does a book, look at the middle. He puts the heart of what he wants to say, often in the heart of the text. So here in Ephesians 4, we have the heart of the text of the book of Ephesians.

The book of Ephesians is a book about connection. It's a book about relationship. It's a book about relationship with God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who is in relationship with himself, the great three-in-one.

It's a book about relationship among Christians and also relationship with those who are far from Christ. The focus this morning, and if you know and you've heard me teach, you know how much I am always teaching and encouraging to have relationships with those who are far from God. But I'm shifting this morning to another biblical priority, which is relationship with each other.

You need to be very close with several Christians in your life, as Paul's teaching. He describes life as a walk. In the first part of chapter 4, he'll talk about living or a walk worthy of the calling to which you've been called, a worthy walk.

Walk can also be a way of talking about a journey or a pilgrimage, a common metaphor for life, that life is a pilgrimage, a journey, a walk. And one of the ways you live a walk worthy of your calling is to come close to other Christians, to build close relationships with other believers. And in verses 1 to 3, and go ahead and turn there if you're not there yet.

So either in your Bible or in your bulletin there, turn to Ephesians 4, chapters 1 to 3, verses 1 to 3, into chapter 4. We see that Paul actually will teach us how it is that we have close relationships with Christians. He gives a how teaching. And his how teaching is A, through bearing with one another in love.

Bearing, key word. Two, through maintaining the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace, maintaining. Okay, so two teaching words from Paul.

If you're a note taker, you're taking that note, if that's how you do it. Bearing, maintaining. Those are the two spiritual disciplines that Christians learn so they can have close relationship with each other.

Before we jump into that, let me say one key way I want to apply this text today. So sometimes you wait till the end for a preacher to give you the application. You don't have to wait.

You got it right now. Here it is. Not the only application, just a key one.

We are starting small groups today at Res. We've been working on it for a year. We're launching Res groups today.

And one of the key reasons we're launching Res groups is that Sunday morning is not enough for your development and your work of mission as a Christian. And that we need to know, as pastors, I need to know that you have every opportunity to have close friendship with each other. Res groups are for relationship.

Res groups are for mission. Res groups are for growing in faith, in the Spirit, and in the Bible. I'm looking at relationship, Christian friendship especially this morning.

And one of my hopes is if you're not involved in a transformation intensive small group already, about 65 of you are involved in that, that you will be involved in a Res group so that you can build close Christian relationship. But it could be that you're starting a school year and you've got a new roommate. It could be that you realize your marriage needs a new season of closeness.

It could be that some friends have moved and you need to build some new friendships. This application goes beyond Res groups to other areas of close relationship with Christians. Let's look at Ephesians together.

Let's go to Ephesians 4. Bear with one another. Bear with one another. Bearing with one another takes two things.

And we're going to open these things up. It takes time. It takes tenderness.

To learn to bear with one another takes two things. It takes time. It takes tenderness.

I therefore a prisoner for the Lord, verse 1, chapter 4, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you've been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love. Let's focus on verse 2. Paul is clarifying for a reason, I'm a prisoner of the Lord. He wrote this one of his prison letters.

He wrote this while he was in prison. So when Paul is a prisoner, we know that he has one thing. He has time.

He has a lot of time. So when we talk about bearing with one another, one of the most important things and disciplines we have to learn as a bearing discipline is that we have to take time. A more precious commodity to res folks than money.

You all deal with money, so do I. It's a deal for us. It's a big deal. Your bigger deal, having pastored you for almost 20 years, is time.

It's harder for me to ask for your time than it is for me to ask for your money. It's just true. It's hard if you ask for my time, right? It's a big deal to us.

We live in a very accelerated society in Chicago. We live in a very competitive part of the country, and time is our main currency, especially at a place like Res. Okay, so if we want to bond with one another and bear with one another, we need to take a lot more time.

A literal bearing experience that I had was several years ago when my older kids, they were close together in age. If we wanted to go for a walk, I had to bear them, which meant I, and these things were not as sophisticated as they are now, which means it hurt more. So I had to put one on my front, front pack.

I put one on my back, backpack, right? And we got photographs of me, you know, just dripping in sweat, having gone for a hike, right? We went for a hike together, which meant that I had to go very slowly because I was bearing both of my children. It slowed me way down, and that's just essential to bearing with one another in love. We have to slow way down.

It slows your life down. It carries somebody else's burden to come close to them. That slows your life down because it gets messy, and they get really sick.

I got to care for them. Well, they have a crisis. Well, they have a celebration.

I got to rearrange your calendar because they need you, and you need them, and you're bearing with one another in love. It requires a major slowdown. There's a great little handwritten sign at the Albatross Drive-In on Washington Island in Door County.

Door County is a place in the upper Midwest where people go to slow down. It's a wonderful, beautiful place in Wisconsin. This is what the sign says at the Albatross Drive-In on Washington Island in Door County.

It says, we are not fast. We are good. We are courteous, but we are not fast.

For fast, go to Chicago. Well, here we are in Chicago. So what do we do? We slow down.

You can't build a really close bond at a high clip. You can't do it. You can't build it digitally.

You can enhance friendship with some digital communication, but you can't build it. You need RL, real life, and RT, real time. You need real life and real time to get really close to other Christians.

In Brazil, they have made a science out of building speed bumps. There's a Portuguese word, lombada, for the speed bump, and if you're thinking about a speed bump as our kind, gentle speed bump out here, don't think about that for a moment. Think about a pitched, concrete mountain peak.

The speed bumps in Brazil are often built by people in their neighborhood to slow you down. So you come up to a Brazilian speed bump, and if you come flying over one of those like an American one, you scrape the whole undercarriage of your car. So you come to an American speed bump, you stop, you move one tire, then the other tire, slowly over the speed bump.

What is your lombada relationally? See, res groups, they're made to be lombadas. You go, oh man, Stewart, you're asking me to do one more thing. I'm not asking you to do one more thing to speed up your life.

That would not be good pastoring. I am asking you to do something that will slow your life down. Res group tonight, oh, I'm going to be connected with other people and in a relationship.

Regular marriage connection that we've put together, that slows me down. My children need me. Speed bump.

My friendship needs me. Speed bump. You need speed bumps where you can bear with one another in love.

Bearing requires time. It also requires a kind of tenderness. Paul calls it gentleness.

To bear with one another goes both ways. You both need to tenderly step into somebody's situation that you're loving and coming close to and be tender with them as they're going through a burden, but also requires not only do you take on people's burdens in a loving way, a good way, but you accept others taking on your burden, that you're actually in a vulnerable, tender place and you let someone else come into that vulnerable, tender place. So the burden bearing becomes profoundly mutual.

That's how, that's one of the key just mechanics of getting close to other people is a tender, gentle, bearing one another situation. We get super lonely. We haven't made a bearing one another time and tenderness investment.

Our, Kevin's last two pregnancies, our last two kids were just challenging pregnancies and challenging deliveries. And especially our final child's birth and delivery. It was a high risk pregnancy.

It was a high risk delivery. And what happened in that time is that we had close Christian friend that we'd invested time in for years come bear our burden. Do you know that one of you came every day for three weeks before Beckett was born, almost the entire day at our house.

You washed dishes, you made meals, you just came into our family. Another one of you, as the blizzard was falling and he was seeming to be born at some point, the Chicago blizzard of February 2nd was falling. We had to beg you to leave so you wouldn't get caught in snowdrifts because you still wanted to stay out and be supportive.

Do you know when that moment came and she had to be rushed into an emergency C-section in the middle of the night with the blizzard at its peak, that I had people on my phone that were close Christian friends. At 2 a.m. I could text and I could call and I could say, I need you right now. I need you to pray.

I need you to step in. I just need to know that you're there. Because I was super vulnerable.

We were super tender, but people bore with us in love at that point. You've got to have 2 a.m. friendships. You've got to have when that 2 a.m. is a metaphor.

You know, in that moment when you're the most vulnerable and you're the most exposed, you don't know what's going on. You've got to have people that you can reach out to in that moment that are close Christian friends. That's bearing with one another in love that alleviates the deep loneliness of the human soul as well as our own American culture.

Do you have those 2 a.m. relationships? That's an inventory you need to take and you can start building them now. Not only do we bear, we also maintain. Verse 3. Eager, engaged.

This is good. Paul actually does something here. Eager to maintain.

Eager and maintain. Maintain sounds like a passive word. It could sound like a maintenance-minded word.

It's not engaging. He's eager to maintain. It's important, that phrase, because he's actually calling this to a very active reality.

Maintaining requires 2 things. It requires gift and it requires some grit. It first requires understanding a gift.

What do we maintain? The very essence of the word maintain means there's something to be maintained, right? I didn't plant my lawn. I maintain it. I didn't build my car.

I maintain it. It's already there. What Paul is saying is that what's already there is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

He's always been there and he's always been in perfect relationship with himself, perfect communion, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, that unity is an established reality of all things. You cannot make unity. You cannot create unity.

You maintain the gift of unity, the gift of God himself. That's a relief. You cannot activate your way into unity.

You maintain it. You engage it. You receive the gift of unity.

Theologian John Webster, a wonderful thinker, says this about the gift of unity. God is essentially to the depths of his Trinity being, his triune being, his Father, Son, and Holy Spirit being, God is essentially God for us and God with us. God is for us, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

God is with us in profound communion and relationship. And all about close friendship and all about bearing with one another is based on this theological, biblical reality. It's an overflow.

It's a profound overflow. It's a gift. Here's an experience I had of maintaining the bond of the Spirit as a gift.

I did nothing to get myself here. It was up here in this chancel stage. It was about a year ago.

We had our annual diocesan gathering of worship and Holy Spirit ministry and training for mission. It was an incredible time. It was one of our worship nights and one of my close partners has been working closely with an African-American church in Oak Park called True Freedom.

True Freedom's pastor was there, Michael Wright. You may remember Michael from our Easter festival. Michael was there.

He brought several of his pastor friends. It was our worship team and True Freedom's worship team, African-American, and our group mixed together. We were all worshipping the Lord.

The Spirit of God was so happy with the unity of the ethnicities and races brought together on that night. He descended in power. Eight pastors were up here with me.

They just came up to worship with us. And one of the African-American pastors leaned over to me while we were worshipping. He said, look man, I don't even know you, but I love you.

See, that's the gift, right? That's the gift. We were in the Holy Spirit together. We were based on the reality of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Only Christians do that. Only Christians are given that kind of gift. It doesn't have to be across the races.

It can be across the genders, across different backgrounds and family, socioeconomic. It's a gift. It's given to us.

And yet it takes grit. Maintaining does take work. It takes a willingness to step in.

Because here's the beautiful thing. The Father has never offended the Son. The Son has never insulted the Father.

The Holy Spirit has never been put out with either one of them. There's nothing between them. They're imperfect, which fold relationship unity one with another.

That's not true about us. You've offended each other. You've really hurt each other.

Some of the hurts you've done to each other that I've done to you, you've done to me, you're still carrying. There's something between you. You're lonelier because of it.

You're less connected because of it. So there's a grit in maintaining the unity of the Spirit and imitating the love of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit insofar as we are called to step in to places where there's something between us and work on it together. Okay, let me be really clear about this.

Let me be really clear about this. Sometimes you don't. Okay, sometimes you bear with one another in love.

If there wasn't a particular insult or a particular offense that just won't go away, just kind of a nebulous like they just bother me, you're probably called to bear with one another. You need to discern, am I bearing here or am I maintaining it? It takes a discernment. In my early 20s, I learned about conflict.

I was like, yeah, any conflict at all, I'm going to go find and talk about it with somebody. We've got a conflict. Let's talk about it.

It was really exhausting. I mean, I exhausted everybody around me. I was exhausted.

I realized, you know what? Sometimes you just bear with that person. You just love them. That's what Paul's teaching.

But when something's come between you and you can't stop thinking about it, it's specific, it just keeps reoccurring in your heart and your mind and your prayer time, then possibly that's the time you do need to

go and engage in the grit. Brett's going to teach into this far more in two weeks on walking love. But I want to identify that that is a reality of maintaining the unity of the Spirit.

But here's the beautiful news about that. That unity that you so want with that Christian brother or sister that's damaged or bruised, it's all there in Jesus still. His unity is still fully there.

And where you want to go with them is already established in the Lord. You can get there. You can repair and renew and redeem relationships because there's an already of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

There's a not yet, but there's an already. I reject for the Church of Jesus Christ that we are a loneliness culture. In the name of Jesus, the Church of Jesus Christ is a culture of close relationship with one another and with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

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