

In 2023, the US Surgeon General's office published a study on the effects of a particular epidemic in our nation.

The 80-page summary of *many* scientific studies detailed the ways in which this epidemic decreased the odds of survival by 50%!

This is worse than smoking 15 cigarettes a day, drinking 6 alcoholic drinks per day, and physical inactivity, among others.

This epidemic also increases Cardiovascular Disease, Hypertension, Diabetes, Infectious Diseases, Cognitive Function, Depression, and Anxiety, as well as Suicidality and Self-Harm.

Any guess what this harmful and deadly epidemic is? It's not COVID.

The title of the study is this: ***Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation.***¹

Pretty shocking, huh? In a world where there has never been a greater ability to connect—reliable transportation, cell phones, texting, social media, . . . we are dying from loneliness at alarming rates. How is that even possible?

To bring things a little closer to home. . . A recent Atlantic Monthly article by Derek Thompson looked at the rapid and significant decline in church attendance in the past 25 years, such that membership in houses of worship fell below a majority for the first time on record in 2021.

More than one-quarter of Americans, in a new survey, now identify as atheists, agnostics, or religiously “unaffiliated,” the highest level of non-religiosity in the poll's history.

The drop in religious attendance has coincided with a historically unprecedented decline in face-to-face socializing, and this collapse is steepest for some of the groups with the largest declines in religiosity. “Young people, who are fleeing religion faster than older Americans, have also seen the largest decline in socializing,”

The article goes on to wonder,

“Did the decline of religion cut some people off from a crucial gateway to civic engagement, or is religion just one part of a broader retreat from associations

¹ <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

and memberships in America?” [Thomson asks.] The direction of causation is unclear, “but what’s undeniable is that nonreligious Americans are also less civically engaged,” he writes. “[According to one report] . . . religiously unaffiliated Americans are less likely to volunteer, less likely to feel satisfied with their community and social life, and more likely to say they feel lonely. “An epidemic indeed. . .

I’m sure that all of us can think of friends and family who struggle with loneliness. How do you feel about your relationships this morning? How connected or lonely are you feeling today. . . ?

If ever a lectionary passage was written to address a contemporary BROKENNESS, our gospel this morning speaks of the antidote to loneliness and isolation: the relational and spiritual connection to Jesus, a connection that draws us close not only to God, but, to one another.

We’ve been spending time in the gospel of John in the past few weeks, Centered on the extended discourse that Jesus gave on Maundy Thursday. Last week, the assigned text (though we didn’t read it because of our guest preacher) was the family story of the *vine and the branches*.
5 I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me, you can do nothing. Before that, Jesus talked about being the good shepherd, which my friend John preached quite memorably, esp. with his camp song.

And today, Jesus springs a new idea on the disciples. As with many texts and ideas, the thought of Jesus as a “friend” is quite unremarkable to us.

Speaking of camp songs. . . (!) Maybe you know the song “Jesus is a friend, he’s a friend next to you.”

And maybe all the add-on verses that are designed to keep the kids engaged: Shake another hand, shake a hand next to you, scratch another back, and the always mayhem-inducing “bump another rump”

Yes, we are used to a familiar buddy, Jesus, who wants to hang out, go to coffee with us, watch the game, or go get lunch.

BUT, it's almost certain that when Jesus said this,
the disciples did a double take.

Say what, Jesus? You are a rabbi, and a teacher, our mentor,
the son of God, and. . . you are saying we are friends?!

There are two great relationships that define what it means to be a human being: that of FAMILY and FRIENDSHIP. Family is pretty easy. We are here because we have a biological father and a biological mother. If they, or one or the other, had more children, or if families blend, we have siblings.

And we get what we get.

And, as the saying goes "You can choose your friends, but you can't choose your family"

Yes, friends, on the other hand, are of our own choosing, and, of course, our friends must choose us.

There are no one-way friendships;
all friendships are a two-way street.

Both parties must be on board and committed.

For example, if I told you I was friends with Joe Mauer or Caitlin Clark, you might say, wow, that's cool, how did you get to be friends?

And if I said, well, I don't really know them, but, they're my friends.

You'd rightly question my judgment if I think

I have a friend that I've never even met.

Back to the no-doubt surprised disciples.

Their Bible, our Old Testament, has very little to say about friendship.

There is one story in the Old Testament that has traditionally been understood to be about friendship: the story of David and Jonathan.

But even there, it's pretty one-sided since Jonathan loves David,
but we are never told what David thinks about Jonathan.

FAMILY, on the other hand, is a different matter. Beginning with the creation of human beings who are told to "be fruitful and multiply" to Abraham being promised that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars, to the story of the CHILDREN of Israel, the OT is a story of family.

So Jesus's statement that he calls the disciples "friends" would have been startling.

And, in spite of the songs and other common understandings
of our friend Jesus, it can be surprising to us, too, I think.

Commentator Melissa Earley describes it this way:

“Jesus gives us a different example of leadership. Jesus says, “I don’t call you servants any longer . . . instead I call you friends.” He blurs the boundaries between them. He remains in them; they remain in him. They all remain in God. The lines between rabbi and disciples, leader and followers, Savior and saved get smudged. There is now a reciprocity, a greater mutuality, a shared vulnerability. They need each other.”

We need each other. And we abide with each other,
even as we abide with Jesus.

And then, there is another puzzling statement from Jesus in verse 14:

“You are my friends if you do what I command you.”

Strange, right? Do you have any friends who would say that?

Friendship and mutual relationships do not involve one person dictating to the other what they should do.

To understand this, we need to remember that this text is in the context of Jesus' “last lecture,”

which is about equipping the disciples for what lies ahead, preparing them for life after the resurrection and ascension.

He talks of his being the vine and them being branches, and he talks of them abiding in him as he abides with the Father.

So, in this context of connectedness in the vineyard,
Jesus's statement is not so much an ultimatum—do this or else!—
as it is an *invitation to imitation*.

“See what I’m doing for you?

See the love I have for you,

It’s the same love the Father and I have for each other,

now, won’t you too, love the way I’ve loved, my friends?”

Saint Augustine put it this way:

Jesus says, “If you keep My commandments, you shall abide in My love,” [this means that] . . . Your keeping of My commandments will be evidence to you that you abide in My love.

It is not that we keep His commandments first, and that then He loves; but that *He loves us, and then we keep His commandments*.

And when we keep his commandments, we love the way he loved.
We abide in his love, and we share his love with our neighbor,
And, of course,
Jesus also even calls us to share his love with our enemies.

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Back to the Surgeon General's report. The subtitle of the study is *The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community*.

It concludes with this encouragement:

“Loneliness and isolation represent profound threats to our health and well-being. But we have the power to respond. By taking small steps every day to strengthen our relationships, and by supporting community efforts to rebuild social connection, we can rise to meet this moment together. We can build lives and communities that are healthier and happier. And we can ensure our country and the world are better poised than ever to take on the challenges that lay ahead.”

For those of us who want to follow Jesus, relationship-building isn't something we have to muster up because it's good for us or good for our loved ones, or good for our country. . .

No, for us, it begins with God in Christ,
who laid down his life for us,
his friends.
And was resurrected to new life.

And out of that experience of love,
Out of our gratitude,
we follow the way of Jesus,
the way of self-sacrificial love for others.
Because Jesus loves us and calls us to do the same.

Friends, let us go this week, knowing that we are loved, so that we might love others
And be agents of healing in a broken and lonely world.

In the name of the F, S, & HS, Amen.