

LIVING THE RELATIONSHIPS CHRIST CAME TO REDEEM
(2) ELIZABETH: WHY LONELINESS IS NOT GOD'S IDEA

Luke 1:18-24

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(Loosely inspired by John Ortberg's book, *Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them*, Zondervan)

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PROLOGUE

For this season of Advent, I thought it would be insightful to pick some key Christmas story characters and then reflect on their lives using some of the ideas from John Ortberg's book, *Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them*. The characters are represented on the front of your worship programs by photographs of actors dressed as the biblical characters. In order you have: John the Baptist; Elizabeth his mother; Mary the mother of Jesus; Joseph, the husband of Mary and adopted father of Jesus; and Jesus himself. Today we consider Elizabeth and why loneliness is not God's idea.

SCRIPTURE

Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." {19} The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. {20} But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur." {21} Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. {22} When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. {23} When his time of service was ended, he went to his home. {24} After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion (Luke 1:18-24 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

Zechariah was a priest who lived about 2,000 years ago. (By the way, Zechariah, Zachariah, and Zacharias all refer to the same person.) Every direct descendant of Aaron (the brother of Moses) was automatically a priest. Elizabeth, the wife of Zechariah, was also of the priestly line.

But in Elizabeth's and Zechariah's lives there was tragedy. Elizabeth and her husband were childless. To be childless in those days was economically and socially disastrous: economically, because parents had no one to support them in their old age; socially,

because tradition held that childlessness was a judgment for sin, and many people assumed the worst. Consequently, most people kept Elizabeth at a distance, and for much of her adult life she was a lonely woman.

But this judgment upon her did not come from God. It is not God's plan to treat people this way. Loneliness is not God's idea. Far from it. As Dallas Willard says:

God's aim in human history is the creation of an inclusive community of loving persons, with himself included as its primary sustainer and most glorious inhabitant.

1. LONELY IN A CROWD

There are so many people around us and yet loneliness is epidemic. One can be lonely even in a crowd. It has been estimated that 20 percent of the American population feels chronically lonely. Additionally, the number of Americans who say they have no one to discuss important matters with has more than tripled since 1985.¹ One anonymous survey indicated that 90 percent of American males lack a true close friend. But when in a parallel survey they were asked to give their names, the figure plummeted dramatically and men said they were "independent" rather than lonely. The researchers theorized that the men did this because loneliness is associated with losers and they did not want to admit to being a loser. It was Mother Theresa who pointed out that loneliness is the leprosy of modern society and no one wants anybody to know they are a leper.

Some years ago, Suzy Becker came out with a bestseller called, "The All Better Book." It captures the essence of children's ideas on how to solve the world's problems. When asked how to repair the hole in the ozone layer, Sara, age 8, says, "Get some dirt and seeds and plant flowers over the hole to make it look pretty for the aliens." When asked, "How can grown-ups have more fun?" little Katie says, "Run through the sprinkler."

But here is perhaps the toughest problem that the book tackles: "With billions of people in the world, someone should be able to figure out a system where no one is lonely. What do you suggest?"

Young Kalani says: "People should find lonely people and ask their name and address. Then ask people who aren't lonely their name and address. When you have an even amount of each, assign lonely and not lonely people together in the newspaper."

¹Olds, J. & Schwartz, R.S. (2009). The lonely American: Drifting apart in the 21st century. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Little Max came up with: “Make food that talks to you when you eat. For instance, it would say, ‘How are you doing?’ and ‘What happened to you today?’”

But the most evocative response, one that really got to me, comes last:

“Sing a song. Stomp your feet. Read a book. Sometimes I think no one loves me, so I do one of these.” - Brian, Age 8.

"With billions of people in the world, someone should be able to figure out a system where no one is lonely."

I do not doubt that Elizabeth and Zechariah loved each other. But they felt disconnected from others. They felt the shame of not living up to society's standards though that shame was based on a false judgment. But they were right in feeling the need to be connected to others even though that seemed like a painful impossibility. John Ortberg comments:

The yearning to attach and connect, to love and be loved, is the fiercest longing of the soul. Our need for community with people and the God who made us is to the human spirit what food and air and water are to the human body.

2. MADE IN THE IMAGE

"With billions of people in the world, someone should be able to figure out a system where no one is lonely." Well, someone did. That someone is God. The system is called community.

In the story of Creation in the Book of Genesis we read:

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness (Gen 1:26 NRSV).

We are made in the image of God. This does not mean we *are* God. Nor does it mean we have god-like powers. Rather, there is something rooted in the being of God that is also rooted in us. And that something is a sense of community. Ortberg tells us:

“I believe that if you had to sum up in a single word what God is up to, what his goal is in creating the universe and the persons who inhabit it, that word would be community. This business of community turns out to be something far deeper than just building a successful network of emotional support. It is not simply about loneliness avoidance. It is the reason why the universe exists, and why you and I do as well.”

Furthermore, God has been experiencing community throughout eternity. This is because God is three persons in one. The term we use for this is “Trinity.” The word “Trinity” is not found in the Bible. It is our word to describe what is found in the Bible, namely, that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit – One God. Three persons in the one God.

To put it another way, the Bible says over and over again, “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8 & 16). Love requires more than one person. C. S. Lewis points out, “If God was a single person then before the world was made, God was not love.” But God is not a single person. God is three persons in one. Therefore, the statement that “God is love” has always been true. We believe that the living, dynamic community of love has been going on in God forever, for all eternity. And God is so in love with community that he wanted to create a world full of people with whom he could share it.

3. THE GREAT INVITATION

One day, Zechariah was in the Temple and he saw an angel standing at the right side of the altar of incense and was overcome with fear. The angel’s first words to him were, “Do not be afraid.” The angel went on to say, “Your prayer has been heard” (Lk 1:13).

What prayer is this? We might assume that it was a prayer for a child. True enough, the couple had prayed for children for many years. But now he and Elizabeth are quite old, and so perhaps they have given up on the idea of having children.

So what prayer does the angel refer to – the prayer Zechariah is offering at this moment. Standing there before the altar of incense his petitions would represent the nation. At this most holy moment he would ask for the Messiah to come to save Israel and the world. What an answer to both prayers this angel brings: A couple’s long-awaited child would be the herald of the Messiah.

The Messiah, whom we know to be Jesus, makes it possible for us to enter into the community of God. We have been invited to join in the fellowship of the Trinity. This is why Jesus says:

"Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Mt 18:20).

To gather in Jesus' name means to relate to other people with the same spirit of love, delight and servanthood that characterizes Jesus in the Trinity. For all eternity the Father has loved the Son. For all eternity the Son has loved the Father. And this love between them is so real that this love is a person too – the Holy Spirit.

A community of loving people is God's trademark. When I am in community, I experience

what might be called "fullness of heart." To experience community is to know the joy of belonging, the delight at being known and loved, the opportunity for giving and growing. This can happen when two or three or more of us gather in Jesus' name, *really* gather in Jesus' name.

CONCLUSION

Brennan Manning tells the story of a man named Ed Farrell, who traveled from his home in Detroit to spend a two-week vacation in Ireland to celebrate his uncle's eightieth birthday. When the day dawned, Ed and his uncle rose early to greet the sun. They walked along the shores of Lake Killarney, enjoying the emerald green grass and crystal blue waters. Then the uncle began to do an unusual thing: He began to skip along the shore of the lake, smiling like a schoolboy in love. Ed was puffing hard as he tried to catch up to him. "Uncle Seamus, you look very happy. Do you want to tell me why?" "Yes," said the old man, tears running down his face. "You see, the Father is very fond of me. Ah, me Father is so very fond of me."

Ortberg observes:

So it is in the Fellowship of the Trinity: "The Father is very fond of me." This is the fellowship into which we are invited—one that can make eighty-year-old hearts laugh and cry and dance for the sheer joy of being loved. We were not made for loneliness; we were made for this joy."

You see, the Father is very fond of you.