

Alone in a crowd

by *Kirsten L. Klassen*

"Parenting is the greatest act of stewardship," said one of the fathers from my church. He was speaking from the pulpit. I was sitting next to a friend who had never married or had children. She turned to me and smirked, "So where does that leave the rest of us?"

I had not realized that my friend noticed these slights, or that she felt strongly enough to speak up for those of us who weren't included—if only in a private comment. This was the sort of comment in church that separated us into parents and non-parents, creating lines of division.

I don't know if my friend told the father that his proclamation had offended her. But if she had, she might have built a bridge instead of a wall.

Being vulnerable with each other is the surest way to fight isolation in community. And, yet, it's terribly hard—especially when we may simply assume other people have more perfect lives than we do.

I visited a few months ago with an older woman who has known me all my life. Before this, I had never spent time alone with her. We talked about her daughter, who I did not know.

The daughter's life was considerably different than what she would have wanted for her child. The woman talked about some of her daughter's struggles, and then she said, "Many of her problems were my fault."

I was, at first, speechless. Then I commended her bravery in being so honest with me. I told her, "It's easy to tell others about our accomplishments. It's much more difficult to admit where we've failed."

Because of her openness, I felt liberated to speak openly about issues I've struggled with in my life—as a wife, mother, daughter, Christian, and human being. I knew she would not judge me. Since she had forgiven herself, I thought she would also forgive me.

Seeing each other as human beings who stumble in our aspirations to live fully realized spiritual lives, instead of seeing each other as perfect angels, is one step in conquering isolation. And having the courage to allow others to see different aspects of ourselves is just as critical.

I wanted to make a list of the reasons we feel isolated in community, but the list became so long as to become meaningless. We may feel isolated because of experiences we have had, beliefs we hold, physical traits we have, illnesses that limit us—to name only a few categories.

Overcoming our loneliness is critical to our choosing to remain in the community—whether that community is a family, a church, a workplace, or a neighborhood.

When one of my friends quit his job to work out of his home, at first that seemed like a good solution to his growing intolerance of other people. But less than a year later, he took his own life. He left a note for his friends, which his wife sent me.

His note expressed his despair, but most significantly, his hope and expectation that he was going to a better place. He was not a Christian, nor did he embrace any other theology. He was in pain, and he believed that by ending his life, his pain would end. But he also thought he was going to a better place—a place where he wouldn't feel so alone.

So, what makes us feel close to people? Understanding, acceptance, affection. When we feel any of these, it's hard to feel isolated. Yet, in my opinion, many churches (of many different denominations) place too much emphasis on doctrine and not enough on communicating the endless love God longs to share with each of us.

Recently I was talking to a woman raised in the Mennonite church who doesn't go to church anymore. She finds the church too judgmental. She doesn't get a sense of God's love from the church. An old friend whose husband was prominent in the music ministry of a church I attended once said to me, "I can't hear anything the minister says about how we're supposed to live until first I know how much God loves me. If they start there, then once I'm feeling really loved, then I can listen."

I'd never met anyone else who said this so forthrightly. It addresses the need for community, for real relationship between an individual and her God, before any expectations are offered. Once I know God celebrates me, my Creator rejoices in me, then I can accept whatever else my relationship with God involves.

Why wouldn't this also apply to the people in our worshipping communities—those friends and strangers whose lives may seem so perfect or so flawed and yet somehow we are called together? By allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, we discover connections, we explore a shared humanity, and we are granted grace. Isolation doesn't stand a chance. 📌



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