

The First Sunday after the Epiphany: Mark 1.4-11

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It could be because I'm getting old and boring, but my hopes, not only for myself, but for all of the people I care about in this world, which includes all of you, are getting simpler. Something I want for all of us is that we always have a few difficult, challenging friends in our lives. If I manage to convince you to share this odd hope, maybe you'll also be receptive to the good news that baptism can be a help. It may or may not help you deal with your difficult, challenging friends. But it's guaranteed to provide you with some. I thought it was only fair to let little Sloan Carter Slatery know just what she's in for today.

After Christmas Ardelle and I spent some time with family in Richmond and Washington D.C. Our difficult and challenging friendship with a couple of dogs meant we made the trip by car, but we won't go into all that. Except to say that the point here is that every last one of us and every creature we love, human or not, can be a little difficult and challenging at times. In fact, it's when I don't think I could possibly be a difficult and challenging person that I'm almost certainly in the act of being one right then, in spades. Am I right?

On the drive we listened to an interview with the author of "Hanging Out: The Radical Power of Killing Time." The title itself says something about life in the modern world. Hanging out with other people for no particular reason is apparently an increasingly endangered practice. And the book's author, a college professor named Sheila Liming, worries we may actually be losing some of the basic skills necessary to hanging out.

The broader issue that concerns her is one I'm sure you've heard mention of in recent years: loneliness. I regularly hear a statistic that crystalizes the problem in a freshly depressing way. Since 1990 there's been a 25 percentage point decrease in the number of Americans who say they have 5 or more close friends. And it's bad enough news that 41% of Americans over the age of 66 describe themselves as lonely. But nearly twice that many — 79% of people between the ages of 18 and 24 — say they're lonely. Why is that? And, more specifically, is loneliness something Christians should concern ourselves with, especially given all the other pressing problems in this world?

It's interesting, at least it is to me, that on the Sunday we read about Jesus's baptism in the Jordan, our first lesson is from the very first verses of Genesis. In the beginning, God creates the heavens and the earth and brings a living order to the formless void. Not only that, God pronounces every created thing good in the six days to come.

But maybe you remember how things will go wrong. Rather than live in the given abundance of the cosmos, and, more locally, the garden, humans reach out and grasp for the one thing they're told not to touch. What happens? Broken relationships. Estrangement. Loneliness enters the story as humans hide themselves from God and from one another. People become estranged from their own bodies, a distance opens up between men and women, between humans and the earth. Within a few chapters a jealous son of Eve and Adam will murder his own brother and will be doomed to wander the earth as a marked stranger, alone.

The scriptures, then, of Christians and Jews, don't suggest that loneliness and estrangement are modern problems. Quite the opposite. Loneliness and estrangement are the first symptoms of the first rupture in the goodness and givenness of things. So whatever else Jesus's baptism was supposed to be about, I think it was an entrance into, and hopefully a source of healing for people caught in, a world whose brokenness presents first as a space that's opened up between us and made us lonely.

In that interview about hanging out, Sheila Liming began spelling out ways we continue to build the world for loneliness. We too often build our houses and our neighborhoods and our cities for separation and loneliness. Our technologies sure seem to hurt the cause more than they help it at times. One poignant example was about "third places," places like parks or cafes or libraries. For centuries, third places have been spaces made for encountering other humans outside the contexts of home and work. But many of us in the modern world would be terrified to show up in a third place all by ourselves without our phones. Which makes it a little harder to meet a stranger there, doesn't it? You may have to intrude on my conversation with the person I'm texting with, who is not in that place, to say hello. Even more so if I have to take out my earbuds or headphones to respond. It seems small, but it's a real dynamic in our lives that matters, because human contact has always been a risky proposition. I might be misunderstood or judged or rejected, so I'll tend to travel the emotionally safer path in that moment and give my attention to whatever's on my device rather than to the complicated person at the other end of the park bench.

Of course, we know that once you're online, it's not entirely safe. It can be hell. Psychologists tell us that anger can be a constructive emotion. It signals that something's gone awry in a relationship. There's been a hurt or a breach of trust and anger arises because the relationship matters. It's a bid to set things right again. But contempt is different. Contempt is a cutoff. Contempt says, "We're through. You're not even worthy of my attention." And how quickly humans can move to contempt online, where "unfriending" can come at the click of a key.

I hesitate to start a critique of our relationship with technology in a sermon. I'd really rather not be found out as the hypocritical crank I actually am. But these technologies are a meaningful part of our lives, myself very much included. They deserve to be part of the conversation about what a flourishing life requires. Curiously enough, this notion that more loneliness can be what we choose when it's the path of least resistance brought first to mind, was not Marshall McLuhan and the critics of modern technology, but C.S. Lewis.

In 1945, Lewis wrote a book called *The Great Divorce* about a bus ride from Hell to Heaven. But the Hell Lewis imagined isn't a place where you get terrible things that no one would ever choose. It's a place where everyone gets whatever they want right away. What that meant was that if you have a spat with your neighbor, in Hell, you can decide to have a new and bigger house a few blocks over. And if you have another spat with your new neighbor, which of course you will, you can do the same thing again. As the bus takes off from that lonely place, the protagonist sees the lights of the houses from above, growing further and further apart over time, the light furthest out being the empty castle of Napoleon himself, who storms around day and night without a single enemy, or friend, of course, in sight.

Friends, when Jesus stepped into that line of people at the Jordan, I don't think he was looking to have some stain washed from his soul. He didn't step into line with a bunch of

people who were saints and gurus who'd reached a higher level of consciousness either. He stepped into line with us. Humanity. People who are lonely deep down, longing for connection. But people who live in a world that's been built, in some ways, to make us even lonelier, if we don't find a way to do the risky work of friendship.

But friends are exactly what Jesus decided to make of us, fully aware of how difficult we can be. And he set himself to bring healing to this world by seeking out the loneliest and most cut off ones he could find, closing the distances between us, and somehow, in the process, even the distances within ourselves.

So, I return to my original wish for you and for me and for little Sloan Carter to have a few difficult, complicated, and beautiful friends in our lives. Because these are the only kind of friends to be had in this world of difficult, complicated, beautiful people like us.

The good news is that the community of Jesus, which has increased by one at every single baptism since his own, is a fine place to find difficult friends. Not because we're a higher order of humans. We're obviously not, if you've read your church history or been to church at all before. But we do come to this place under a covenant to be truthful with one another about the lonely ways of this world, and by the light of that humbling knowledge, attempt to build a world that's a little less so, one friendship at a time.

For the deepest truth about us, one that goes all the way back to the origin of all things, is that before we were lonely, we were declared to be good and beloved, and were created by God, not for chaos, but for connection and life-giving relationships with one another and with all that is. Don't you think that turning our loneliness into the abundant life we were created for might be why Jesus risked stepping into that line of complicated humans at the Jordan River to strike up a friendship that has now extended even to us?