

At one of the parishes I served, I dealt with a young man whose struggles with loneliness seemed to be the reverse of the norm. Instead of trying to escape it, he worried about losing it. He was in his early 20's, in love with a wonderful young woman, but was conflicted about marrying her because he feared that getting married might interfere with his loneliness, and, in his words, make him "a shallower person with less to give to God and the world." He was an amazing young man – mature beyond his years.

He said, "I walk into a room and automatically look around for a sad face, for someone whose look suggests that there's more to life than partying and the latest celebrity news." There's a danger in simplistically identifying heaviness with depth, but that wasn't true for him. He had a happy personality, seemed to have good friends, and it was a pleasure to speak with him. I had no indication that he was depressed.

He said "Two images do battle within me. When I was 15, my dad died. We lived in the country, and he had a heart attack. We bundled him into the car and my mother was with him in the back seat, holding him as I was driving the car, 15-years-old, and scared. He died on the way to the hospital, but he died in my mother's arms. Sad as this was, there was something of beauty in it. I have always felt that this is the way I would like to die, held by someone I love. But, while that image draws me strongly to marriage, I also look at how Jesus died, alone, abandoned, inside of no one's arms, in an embrace only of something beyond, and I'm drawn to that too. There's a nobility in that which I don't want to let go of. That too can be a good way to die."

He feared losing his loneliness even as he healthily yearned for intimacy. He couldn't fully explain why he was attracted to the loneliness of Jesus on the cross, except that he sensed that this was somehow a noble thing, something very deep, and something that would give him depth and nobility.

Others have experienced this before him, Jesus among them. For example, as a young man, Soren Kierkegaard renounced marriage for the same reason my young friend feared it. Rightly or wrongly, he felt that what he had to give to the world was rooted inside the pain of his own loneliness and could only issue forth from that center and, if he was less lonely, he would have less to give. Was he right?

The fruitfulness of his life, namely, the many people who drew healing and strength from his writing, attests to the truth of his intuition. Henri Nouwen counted himself among them. By their fruits you shall know them! Kierkegaard could be called the patron saint of the lonely. But, like my young friend, he was also conflicted by what this did to him. Too few people understood, and this immersed him in what he described as "the sadness of having understood something true – and then seeing oneself misunderstood." He confessed too that he lived the curse "of never to be allowed to let anyone deeply and inwardly join themselves to me." The Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, commenting on the same thing, once said that the absence of married intimacy in his life constituted "a fault in my chastity." This kind of depth comes at a price.

Why, despite such an obvious downside, are the Kierkegaards of our world drawn to loneliness in the belief that it holds the key to depth, empathy, and wisdom? What does loneliness do for us?

What loneliness does for us, especially very intense loneliness, is destabilize the ego and make it too fragile to sustain us in the normal way. What happens is that we begin to unravel, feel ourselves become unglued, become aware of our smallness, and know in the roots of our being that we need to connect to something larger than ourselves to survive. But that's a very painful experience and we tend to flee from it.

However, and this is a great paradox, this experience of intense loneliness is one of the privileged ways of finding the deep answer to our quest for identity and meaning. Because it destabilizes the ego and disorients us, loneliness puts us in touch with what lays below the ego, namely, the soul, our deepest self. The image and likeness of God lies in there, as do our most noble and divine energies. That's the truth behind the belief that in loneliness there is depth.

This is one of the lessons of the cross, of Palm/Passion Sunday, whether married or single. Don't run from loneliness. Don't see it as an enemy. Don't look for another person to cure our loneliness. Your spouse cannot cure yours – and you cannot cure theirs. We must see loneliness as a privileged avenue to depth and empathy.

Here's the advice of the ancient Persian poet, Hafiz:

Don't surrender your loneliness

So quickly.

Let it cut more deep.

Let it ferment and season you

As few human

Or even divine ingredients can.

Something missing in my heart tonight

Has made my eyes so soft,

My voice

So tender,

My need of God

Absolutely

Clear. Amen. (taken from – and slightly adapted from --Ronald Rolheiser, THE LESSON WITHIN LONELINESS, posting of 5 September 2010)