

**Holy Trinity + June 11, 2017**  
**Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit, WI**  
**Genesis 1:1-2:4a**

Nancy Raabe, Pastor

For a couple of years, after we moved from Ohio to Wisconsin, I was quite lonely. Bill arrived to a vibrant community at the UW-Whitewater. His days were filled with classes, meetings, and other school-related activities. I was happy for him. But there was no community waiting to greet me, and being an introvert, I wasn't about to go out looking for friends. I had plenty of work to occupy myself, but often I couldn't help thinking, "Poor me, I don't even know anyone here to have coffee with." At times the loneliness still felt almost suffocating.

I'm not sure my health suffered during those two years, but it might have if that state had gone on much longer. We are now learning that being lonely for long periods—experiencing what is called social isolation—is not only bad for one's health but can actually cause premature death.

A recent article in *Psychology Today* calls social isolation "a modern plague." In fact, it is a fast-growing epidemic. Some say it's twice as bad as it was just 30 years ago. We are beginning to understand how living an isolated life can have severe physical, mental and emotional consequences. Forty percent of American adults say they are lonely. One-quarter of all Americans have no meaningful social support at all—not a single person they can confide in. Over half of all Americans report having no close confidants or friends outside their immediate family.

Scientists are finding that people without meaningful social connections have disrupted sleep patterns, altered immune systems, more inflammation, and higher levels of stress hormones. Isolation increases the risk of heart disease and stroke by around 30 percent. Socially isolated people

are also 30 percent more likely to die in the next seven years than those who are socially active—and this hazard most often occurs in middle age.

Being alone for extended periods, then, is clearly not good for us. Because God created us out of love, we can conclude that God wants us to be connected to others, and does not want us to be alone.

But what about God's own self? Wasn't God alone, terribly alone when universe was created perhaps 18 billion years ago, and even before that? Don't the first two verses of Genesis 1, which we heard earlier, depict a lonely God going about the business of creating the world all by God's self?

We might think so—were it not for 26 of that same chapter: “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.’”

Our? Who is “our?”

Christians understand this “our” to be the three persons of Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who were all present together at the foundation of the world. These three separate “persons,” so to speak, are held together in the great mystery that is the Holy Trinity. We find a trace of the Spirit's presence in verse 2 of Genesis 1, which tells of how “the Spirit of God swept over the face of the waters.” And we know from the beginning of John's Gospel that the Word, which we know as the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, was present before the universe was formed: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.”

“God in three persons, blessed Trinity,” we sang in our opening hymn. Theologians call this dynamic the “economy” of the Trinity, in the sense of the economy of a household and how everything is kept in balance when jobs are assigned to different people. This relationship is not static

but dynamic, a “dance” in which we can all participate: “Come join the dance of Trinity before all worlds began,” starts the hymn which we are about to sing.

It is only through these three persons of the Trinity that we can experience the fullness of God. The Father created all that is and cares for it, giving all creatures their food in due season. The Son has come into our world as the face of God and the one who died *for us* on the cross, and hangs in there now with us in all of life’s trials. And the Holy Spirit pours God’s love into our hearts, activates the church, and moves us forward in faith to love and serve the world.

But what else do we hear in Genesis 1:26? “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.” As the “image of God,” Christians are summoned to embody God’s care not only for creation, but also for human community. We are called to be in community not just on Sunday mornings or during the half-hour of fellowship that follows, but in other times as well.

This is how much God loves us: God has provided not only for all our materials needs—“body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my limbs, my reason, and all my senses; clothing and shoes, meat and drink, house and homestead, wife and children; fields, cattle, and all my goods,” as Martin Luther writes in his Small Catechism—but God has also created us as creatures in community, in which we find ourselves in the presence of the risen Christ wherever two, or three, or more, are gathered in Jesus’ name.

I suspect many of us live lonelier lives that you’d like to admit. But as your pastor, I love you and I desire the best for you. Therefore, I challenge this congregation to come up with some new ways that we can *be community* to each other. Many churches are energized from within by small-group ministries. These groups of perhaps 4 to 6 people are often formed around certain topics and meet weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly. They might include a food and fellowship group that regularly

shares a meal in someone's home or a local restaurant; a group that reflects on and commiserates over current events; a Bible study that explores how a given passage intersects with the lives of those present; a group for those who have suffered difficult losses; or groups for recipe-sharing, kite-flying or planning outings to fun destinations. No matter what the theme, though, the purpose of these small groups is really to care for each other.

We currently have three groups functioning in this way—the Council, the choir, and the Lydia Group. But we could have a lot more. Please ponder the possibilities in the coming weeks and share your ideas with others. Wouldn't it be wonderful if, by Rally Day in September, we could have a whole network of these small groups ready to take off?

God has given us Christ's Church on earth to proclaim the good news of salvation *in community*. In all our forms of ministry, from one-on-one to corporate worship, we are reflecting to each other the image of God and the love of Christ. Let's bring the mystery of the Holy Trinity down to earth and draw from this wellspring the fullness of life that is ours in Jesus Christ.

Amen.