

## **“Stronger Together”**

**Ecclesiastes 4:1-12; Hebrews 10:19-25**

November 19, 2023

On Friday, the Kairos team returned to Kershaw Correctional Institution to do what’s known as an Institutional Reunion in our terminology. Kairos seeks to form a community between the residents of the institution and outsiders like myself and Clayton. To that end, we don’t just go and have a weekend with the guys, we aim to foster ongoing relationships with them so that we can all continue growing in Jesus Christ. I’ve been really fortunate in my time at Kairos to have made some real friends inside. I sense that I’ve made a new, ongoing friend through this last weekend in Kershaw. This young man was back for the reunion on Friday and we got a chance to catch up. One of the things most of the guys feel initially is the change of environment. During Kairos, we laugh, worship, sing, eat and study together, it’s a real time of authentic community made possible through the Love of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Then, returning to their ordinary lives at the prison requires an adjustment. “Back to reality” one of the inmates bemused once as it was time for them to head back into the dorms. But my new friend and I got to talking about what it feels like to be surrounded by people but, because of the situation, still feeling tremendously lonely. He said something so profound on Friday that I just had to write it down. He said – “In this place, loneliness isn’t just a feeling; it’s a constant companion, a shadow that clings closer than my own skin. It’s the chilling realization that one can be perpetually surrounded and yet profoundly alone, a solitary figure in a crowd, a whisper lost in a storm of silent screams.” That’s positively poetic, isn’t it? “A whisper lost in storm of silent screams.” That guy has a calling as a writer, I do believe.

Anyway, in our frank discussion on loneliness, we covered a lot of ground but we all agreed that just because other people are physically around you, doesn’t mean that you aren’t still somehow isolated. You know there was a time when I was on a bus and it seemed like all the people had on those ear fangs that have become all the rage these days. It dawned on me that here was this mass of humanity, this throng that could be connecting on a real, human level, yet what we were all doing with our earphones and our phone screens was trying to isolate ourselves from all the people around us. I can’t help but see this dynamic spreading out and expanding. The pandemic only accelerated our retreat from one another. COVID-19 appeared and, overnight, it became socially acceptable, desirable even, to have fast food delivered to your door rather than take the time and actually bump elbows with other people.

In our sermon today, we delve into an unsettling yet urgent truth: our society is increasingly turning inward, embracing a solitude that distances us from the communal ties that have historically bound us. This stark reality is not just anecdotal; it’s vividly illustrated in the decline of institutions that once were the bedrock of our social fabric. Consider the profound dwindling of memberships in storied social clubs like the Freemasons and the Elks. These are not mere numbers in a ledger; they are harbingers of a deep-seated shift in our collective ethos. Reflect on the decline in bowling league memberships. Once a bustling hub of community and camaraderie, league bowling now struggles to maintain its relevance, its share of bowling business halving over the decades. This trend is more than a shift in recreational preferences; it’s symptomatic of our growing disconnection from one another.

This detachment from community life is alarmingly evident across the spectrum of American society. The Wall Street Journal and NORC poll findings paint a grim picture: Americans today place markedly less value on community engagement than they did just a quarter-century ago. This isn’t a mere change in priorities; it’s a fundamental alteration in the way we view our place in the world. The decline in participation in civil society institutions, from churches to local school groups, underscores a long-term trend of disengagement. This isn’t just an abandonment of organizations; it’s a retreat from the communal interactions that enrich our lives and our souls. In an age where technology offers an easy escape into a world of virtual isolation, the allure of digital interaction is progressively supplanting the irreplaceable warmth of human contact. This technological convenience, while offering unprecedented access to information and entertainment, also presents a *seductive path to solitude*. This trend towards isolation isn’t just a societal curiosity; it’s a clarion call for introspection and action. As we find ourselves increasingly ensnared in the web of individualism, the fabric of our

community wears thin. The implications of this shift are profound. In our pursuit of personal space and digital convenience, we risk losing the essence of what makes us a community: the shared experiences, the collective joys, the mutual support, and the strength that comes from our togetherness.

In this sermon, we delve into the profound impact of loneliness, a silent epidemic that affects not only our hearts and minds but also our bodies and communities. Imagine living in a world where over a third of adults feel an aching void of disconnect, where despite being surrounded by others, they still feel profoundly alone. This is not just a feeling; it's a reality for many, and its effects are devastating. Loneliness isn't merely a state of solitude; it's a chasm between our desire for meaningful connections and our actual experiences. It's feeling unseen, unheard, in a world bustling with life. The toll of this isolation is staggering. Studies show that loneliness significantly increases the risk of heart disease, stroke, and Type 2 diabetes. Alarmingly, it can even lead to dementia, with social isolation hiking the risk by 50%. The implications for mental health are equally dire, with loneliness being a fertile ground for depression, anxiety, addiction, and tragically, even suicidality. These are not just numbers; they are a clarion call highlighting the crisis we face. Moreover, the economic impact is immense. Loneliness costs the US economy an estimated \$406 billion annually. This stark number reflects not only the health costs but the loss of human potential and productivity. It's a burden that we all bear, directly or indirectly.

But loneliness doesn't just stem from being alone. It's about the quality of our relationships. A lack of authenticity in our interactions, the absence of a quiet, supportive presence, can leave us feeling just as isolated. This reveals a profound truth: We are wired for deep, meaningful connections, not just superficial contacts. *In this state of disconnect, we develop a negativity bias. Lonely individuals become hypersensitive to signs of rejection, which can lead to a self-perpetuating cycle of withdrawal and further isolation. This isn't just a personal struggle; it's a societal one.* And the risks are not just emotional or economic. Chronic loneliness can lead to increased stress hormones, disrupted sleep, weakened immunity, and is a risk factor for diseases like arthritis. In the long term, it can even double the risk of developing Alzheimer's disease. Most poignantly, chronic loneliness significantly raises the risk of mortality.

These aren't just abstract statistics; they are stark realities that reveal a deep-seated need within us all - the need to connect, to belong, to be part of a community. We are not just social beings by choice but by necessity. Our health, our well-being, our very lives depend on these connections. *In a world increasingly marked by isolation and loneliness, the call for community, for genuine, heartfelt connections, has never been more urgent.*

Let us delve deeper into the scriptural wisdom of Hebrews 10:19-25, enriched by the insights of ancient theologians, to understand the indispensable role of community in our spiritual lives. Hebrews 10:19-25 opens with a profound declaration of our newfound privilege in Christ: direct access to God, a privilege once reserved for the high priest. But this access is not just an individual right; it's a communal invitation. "Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith," the passage exhorts, reminding us that our faith journey is not solitary but shared. The heart of this message is in verses 24-25: *"And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."* Here, the Scripture emphasizes the critical nature of community. It's not merely a suggestion but a vital aspect of our faith—a call to mutual encouragement, to inspire each other towards love and good deeds.

This Biblical understanding of community finds resonance in the wisdom of early Church fathers. Ignatius of Antioch, writing around A.D. 110, urged believers to "labor together with one another. Strive in company together. Run together; suffer together; sleep together; awake together, as the stewards, assessors, and servants of God". This vivid imagery captures the essence of shared life in Christ—a life not just side by side but intertwined in every aspect. Justin Martyr, in the second century, reflected on the transformative power of Christian community: "We who valued above all things the acquisition of wealth and possessions now bring what we have into a common stock and share with everyone in need." His words echo the ethos of Hebrews—where the focus shifts from

individual gain to communal support and generosity. Tertullian, writing in the early third century, observed the distinctive nature of Christian community: "It is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to label us. 'See,' they say, 'How they love one another!'" This love was so profound that it transformed societal norms, fostering a unity and shared purpose that was otherwise unheard of.

In the same vein, Hebrews 10:19-25 calls us to embrace this legacy of communal love and support. *"In a world rife with loneliness and isolation, the church is called to be a beacon of hope and connection."* We are reminded that our gatherings are not mere formalities but opportunities to inspire and uplift each other, to forge bonds of love that reflect Christ's love for us.

The narrative of Genesis, particularly the creation of humanity as male and female in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), profoundly illustrates our inherent need for companionship and community. This imagery is not merely symbolic but foundational, indicating that relationships and partnerships are essential aspects of our divine design.

Expanding on this, the Bible offers numerous instances that emphasize the importance of togetherness and collaboration. Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 extols the virtues of companionship, stating, *"Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!"* This passage highlights the practical and emotional benefits of mutual support and cooperation.

Similarly, in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul frequently speaks of the church as the body of Christ, with each member playing a crucial role. In 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, he explains that just as a body is one unit made up of many parts, so it is with Christ's body, the church. Each member is indispensable, and there is a deep interdependence among all. This metaphor underscores the idea that we are created for interconnectivity and communal functioning.

To bring this concept to life, consider the story portrayed in the popular movie "The Shawshank Redemption." The film follows Andy Dufresne, a man wrongfully imprisoned, who forms a profound friendship with fellow inmate Red. Their relationship becomes a lifeline in the harsh environment of Shawshank prison. This friendship not only offers emotional support but also leads to significant personal growth and eventual liberation. The movie powerfully illustrates that even in the bleakest of circumstances, human connection can provide hope, strength, and a sense of purpose. These scriptural teachings and cultural narratives converge on a singular truth: from the very beginning, we are created as social beings, destined to find fulfillment and contentment in partnership with one another. Our innate longing for connection and community reflects the image of a relational God and is fundamental to our identity and purpose.

In our journey to build a vibrant, connected community, let's embrace practical steps that can transform our shared experience. Imagine the power of small groups within our church, intimate circles where laughter and tears are shared, where every story matters. Think of the warmth of our church activities, where hands and hearts come together in service, creating bonds that go beyond Sunday mornings. Picture the profound impact of reaching out to someone who feels isolated. A simple act, perhaps a phone call or a warm greeting, becomes a bridge, reconnecting a soul to the tapestry of our community. Envision our church as a sanctuary of welcome, where each new face is met with open arms and hearts, fostering a sense of belonging from the very first step inside.

Let's consider the joy of mentorship, where wisdom and experience intertwine with youthful energy and curiosity, weaving a rich fabric of intergenerational connection. And as we step out together in service projects, we find that in helping others, we knit ourselves closer, united in purpose and compassion. These actions are more than just activities; they are gateways to profound psychological and spiritual benefits. By engaging in our community, we chase away the shadows of loneliness, replacing them with a light of belonging. Our participation kindles a sense of purpose that echoes deep within our souls, elevating our sense of self-worth and confidence. In this shared journey, we find a haven in times of storm, a place where burdens are lightened by the strength of our collective support. Stress and anxiety fade away in the comfort of our fellowship, replaced by a peace that comes from knowing we are not alone. And, most crucially, this journey enriches our spiritual life. As we gather in worship, study, and prayer, our faith deepens, our understanding of the divine expands, and we grow closer to the heart of God. In this community, we not only discover

ourselves but also the essence of what it means to live out the Gospel, to be the hands and feet of Christ in a world yearning for connection. So, let us move forward with intention and love, weaving these threads into a rich tapestry of community life, embracing each opportunity to connect, to grow, and to serve together. This is our call, our mission, and our joy.

I want to tell you about an experience one of my Kairos brothers had a few years ago. Now the guy I'm talking about is this tall man named Doug. He's about 6'6' or so, so he towers over most people. On top of that, he's got this big, booming voice. He prays with such conviction and volume that you know, without question, that God is listening. He told a story about being in a Subway restaurant with several members of his small group from Good Shepherd United Methodist Church. He said he noticed the young woman taking their order and that she looked, well, a bit worried. After talking with his small group members, Doug went up to the woman and asked if he could pray for her. Just to let you know that Doug isn't some kind of alien. He talked about feeling awkward in the process of going up to her. This stuff doesn't necessarily feel normal in our hyper-individualistic world. But he made it over the hump and talked to the woman. It turned out, she was in distress. Doug and his friends prayed for the woman at the table. Finally, she asked them, what church do they go to. They told her, finished their meal and left the restaurant. Imagine their joy when they saw that same woman grace the doors of their church the following Sunday morning. It was a true joy. They broke through the isolation that woman was feeling with the resplendent light of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.