SANCTUARY MENTAL HEALTH MINISTRIES

BECOMING SANCTUARIES

A FIVE-DAY SANCTUARY DEVOTIONAL ON BELONGING, MENTAL HEALTH, AND THE LIFE OF FAITH

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CONNECTION AND BELONGING

John Swinton

John 15:15

All of us long for friendship. We long to be loved, cared for, and helped to realize that we matter. It must have been amazing for the disciples to hear Jesus' words: "I no longer call you servants, now I call you friends." When these words were spoken, something profound happened in their lives. Suddenly their status in the world changed from being simply followers, to being friends of Jesus. Friends of God. What a wonderful gift! And that gift is still available today. One way in which we can describe the Church is that we are a community of the friends of God. Of course we don't always live up to our God-given status as friends of Jesus. During the pandemic, when those of us in the UK were only allowed out for an hour's worth of exercise everyday, I met one of my neighbours for the first time. Mary was in her eighties and rarely left her house. She said something to me that I will never forget: "They are talking about social distancing. It feels like people have been socially distancing from me for years! It has taken a pandemic for people to start to notice me and knock on my door to see if I'm okay." I felt convicted. I claimed to be a friend of Jesus, but I wasn't acting like one. Jesus always offered friendship to the marginalized, the outcast, the sinner, the lonely, the Marys of this world. To be a friend of Jesus requires that we—all of us together—reach out in Christ-like friendship to those who are ignored and forgotten by society. In a world that craves friendship and love, the question that must guide our lives is deceptively simple: *What would Jesus do?*

Scripture to Consider: Ex. 33:7-11; Isa. 58; 1 Cor. 12:12-27; James 2:23

Reflection Question: Who are the people in your neighbourhood or community who are isolated or lonely?

Prayer: Lord, thank you for friendship. Help us to honour the status of being friends of Jesus and work with you to bring love, hope, and friendship to our neighbours. Amen.

(A version of this devotional was first published in May 2023 in Every Day with Jesus)

THAWING THE SOCIAL DEEP FREEZE: WHEN QUIRKS ARE PART OF BEING HUMAN

Sharon Smith

Luke 19:1-10 (NIV)

I have a friend—let's call her Carol (not her real name). We met at church about fifteen years ago. She is quirky, and so am I; I just know how to hide my quirks a little better than she does. She lives with schizophrenia.

She is often sitting alone at church. She has been part of the same community for over twenty years. She volunteers on Sundays, Tuesdays, and Fridays. She is the bulletin stuffer and pew sorter too! Yet though she is present, she is kept on the outside. She once described her life at church as a "social deep freeze."
You know that feeling you have every so often when everyone is interested in everybody else, and you are put aside for later? That is her constant experience—the social deep freeze. She has gotten used to it. Surrounded by people, yet experiencing social isolation.

Zacchaeus, a short-in-stature collector of taxes, was not given the time of day by his Jewish kin. As a Jewish, first-century tax collector, he served the Romans by collecting money from his fellow Jews. Most tax collectors took more money than was legally required. The crowd assumed Zacchaeus did the same. He was a stigmatized man, marked by the disgrace associated with a particular vocation.

My friend Carol is snubbed because of her social quirks. And most who know her diagnosis keep her at arm's length. But what if Christian community followed Jesus' example? "Come down, immediately, I must stay at your house," or "Come out of the social deep freeze at once, I must have coffee with you."

The interesting thing about social quirks is that we all have them. And the closer we get to people, the more we realize we have more in common than we ever thought. In the words of John Ortberg, "Everyone's normal until we get to know them"… me included!

Scripture to Consider: Ps. 133; John 13:35; 1 John 4:19

Reflection Questions: What are the aspects of your own personality that you try to hide, especially when you meet someone for the first time? What would it feel like to be in the presence of someone who let you relax and let it all out?

Prayer:

For all who live in isolation, we pray for the embrace of a companion.
For all who yearn for acceptance, we pray for communities of belonging.
May we who follow the way of Christ, give and receive the gift of friendship.
Amen.

FEELING INVISIBLE AND THE GOD WHO SEES ME

Jonathan Browning

Genesis 16

A new friend of mine started coming to our church at the beginning of the year. He made a promise to God while in prison that if he got parole, he would attend church again. His parole conditions require him to wear an ankle bracelet at all times, and his every move is monitored and needs to be approved in advance. He told me that ninety-one percent of the people who enter this parole program fail and that in some countries it has been discontinued because it is considered too inhumane.

My friend is hardly invisible. The ankle bracelet stands out, and he is a big guy who has had to look out for himself throughout life. But feelings of invisibility are rarely about our physicality. In my friend's case, childhood trauma and several prison stints have left terrible wounds. The feeling that one is never good enough and will never belong is the narrative for many who live with mental health challenges and certainly for those whose lives have been as complex as his. Ultimately, feeling invisible is a state of the heart, occurring when shame takes root and touches the very core of one's self worth and identity.

He could barely sit through church the first week he came. Shame is toxic, and he has told me several times that all he wanted to do was run out and go and get drunk again. But he managed to stay and made a time to meet with our pastor, just in case he wasn't wanted here. He brought his parole files and criminal record, fully expecting to be asked never to return. What he found was the love of God and the love of a community where he is seen for the wonderful man of God he is.

The story of Hagar in Genesis 16 just might describe the experience of all of us from time to time. For those of us who struggle with mental health challenges, the experiences of exclusion and feeling unworthy are perhaps more harmful than the medical nature of our illnesses. "Being seen" and belonging to a community where we are loved and accepted is such a gift.

Unnamed in my own household;
servant, foreigner, second class, second rate.
A story of exclusion;
quite simply a pawn
in the purposes and plans of my mistress.

Taken or given
it matters not;
inconsequential
mistreated, discarded;
not entirely innocent mind you;
and finally forced to flee
mine is a story without a future.

Or so it would seem.

My story is also one of encounter.
Addressed by name and
drawn into a conversation
that promises that I too
am part of a much greater
future than I could ever envisage.
My son will know freedom.

I call him the God who sees me,
and I know he looks after me.

Scripture to Consider: Mark 10: 46-52; Luke 7: 36-50; John 5: 1-15

Reflection Questions: Who are the people in your community who might be feeling invisible at the moment? What can you do to help them feel seen?

Prayer: Lord, I thank you that my past will never disqualify me from your love or the purposes you have for my life. Help me to see myself the same way that you see me today. Amen.

FINDING HOME

Milissa Ewing

Psalm 84

A number of years ago, our family moved half-way across Canada. We were under the illusion that, being in the same country, we would settle into our new city very quickly. However, a few years in, we still didn't feel completely at home. We didn't have the same sense of history and connection in our new city. We couldn't go on autopilot while driving and often got lost if we weren't using GPS. We couldn't just call up our parents or siblings to arrange weekend dinners. When we'd go back to visit our old city, we'd say, "we're going back home for a visit" (which is somewhat of an oxymoron). And when we'd return to our new city, we'd be hit with homesickness again.

What do we mean when we say we feel "at home?" Does it mean we are comfortable and at ease? Is it when things move from foreign to familiar? In my experience, feeling at home is more than simply knowing the place we are in; it's about being known in the places we find ourselves, whether it's a geographical location or a mental or emotional state. We long to be seen, known, and loved in both our languishing and flourishing. Our new city began to feel like home the summer we returned after our "visit back home," and people at church were glad to see us. Our absence was felt. We belonged to a group of people, whom Scripture tells us are our brothers and sisters in Christ—fellow sons and daughters of our Father in heaven.

For someone experiencing the disorientation, grief, loneliness, and anxiety associated with relocating, it feels trite to simply say, "home is found in Jesus." We know that Jesus both dwells within us and is our dwelling place. But, the tangible experience of Jesus, our home, is found in his family, the Church. When we find ourselves in unfamiliar territory, finding brothers and sisters in Christ who see, know, and love us as siblings, changes our new locale into our new home.

Scripture to Consider:Matt. 12:48-50; John 1:9-15,14:1-4; 1 John 3:1a

Reflection Questions: Is my church the kind of place where the newcomer can find home? How does knowing that, as children of God, we are all brothers and sisters change the way we "find our home in Jesus?"

Prayer: Our Father, thank you that we find our home in you through your son Jesus Christ. Help us to be a community where people "feel at home": seen, known, and loved. May all our brothers and sisters know that they belong. Amen.

MAKING HOMES FOR ONE ANOTHER

Isabelle Hamley

John 14:2, 23

"It's so nice you're home! You don't visit often enough!" Everytime I hear this, I want to run. What is "home?" I live abroad, so when I go back to my home country, people assume I go home, somewhere I belong. But home for me is a complicated place. It's a place of trauma and memories, where belonging meant pain, sadness, and a desperate wish to escape. I don't belong "at home." Rather, "home" is somewhere else.

In some ways, I have many homes: the physical place where I live with the two people closest to me; these people themselves; people I work with who have become friends; friends who welcome me into their lives. Church can be home, but because I visit many different churches for work, this isn't always the case. Ultimately, home is when I don't have to explain myself, and where I know people love me, even on a bad day. Home is both "where" and "with."

Home is also a way of being. It isn't perfect. I don't need everyone to say the right thing to experience home with them. And they don't need me to be perfect either. Home and belonging means being able to be human—fallible, frail, and vulnerable. You can't have home without love, and you can't have love without forgiveness.

This can be really hard. We want to be accepted as we are, but sometimes we're not ready to accept others as they are. We want more, or better, from them. To create home and belonging takes grace and the ability to live with the messiness of all our lives, along with the fact we all struggle in different ways—whether with physical health, mental health challenges, life circumstances, or our own shortcomings in living and loving one another.

I love Jesus' talk of home and house. He points the way to how we may find and inhabit a space of complete belonging. First he says, "In my Father's house there are many rooms" (John 14:2). I like this—there is belonging in God's house, but there is privacy too! Belonging isn't the same as crowding. Belonging allows space for the other to be themselves, for me to be myself, and for us to meet well.

But Jesus doesn't stop there. Home is more than this. True home, and belonging, come when we are gathered together around the One who chooses to make a home with and for us: "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them" (John 14:23).

Scripture to Consider: Ps. 68:6; John 16:32; Rev. 3:20, 21:3

Reflection Questions: Think about what “home” means for you. Who makes you feel at home? And how do you enable others to be at home in the places where you yourself belong?

Prayer:
May the God who chose to make his home with us
be welcome among us,
and may we who are his children
make a home with one another
with grace, forgiveness, and laughter,
where all are welcomed
and none are left at the door.
Amen



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