



Loneliness

Begin with a prayer for a growing desire to experience the freedom into which Christ has brought us. Share further on how sin manifests itself in your different relationships. (20 minutes)

Inner and Outer Community

Much is in process in the Christian world in the formation of Outer Communities, 'outer' having to do with the relationships between people. Very little, however, seems to be done to foster inner community, that within each individual. Our state of inner community is the way in which all our different parts or persons are carried and relate within ourselves.

Each person who has had a significant part in our formation will have left their imprint in us and their presence and effect are carried with us for life. Their manner of seeing and being, whether positive or negative, will have coloured our ways and perceptions.

Inner alienation occurs when the different characters we are and carry within us are out of communion, out of touch. Their way of relating may be at odds and they may be stuck in the roles they play. The alienation will stifle life for us and drain us of the energy we need to live creatively, as this energy is consumed in keeping the inner tensions under control.

Our level of inner community will determine what level of outer community we enjoy. When our inner community is out of kilter, our outer relationships and community remain on a superficial, inflated level. We cannot get to the core of the relationship or work towards meaningful exchange.

Freedom from alienation and loneliness

The reason for most of our inner alienation is that some parts of us work well and make us feel good, whereas others cause us pain or embarrassment.

For instance, a creative part which can make beautiful things will give us pleasure and approval from others, but an inability to work with figures may cause us distress and bring up past ridicule and pain at not being able to do maths.

Our normal tendency is to avoid our inner hurting parts, distancing ourselves and others from them. We move the focus away to a 'nice' part or to something external. We may mask or cover ourselves to hide the blemishes and pains or we may keep others at a 'safe' distance for fear of the pain or the demands any real relationship will make on us. We may not let others too close, since this makes us vulnerable and puts us at their mercy. It may also expose us for what we are really like.

We may also deny others any rights or responsibility over us, thinking that our so-called freedom is at stake if we allow others to have a say in the way we live. (Parents are often felt to be a burden because of this.) And so we move away, we stake out a no-man's-land around ourselves and resent any 'interference' in the way we run our lives. In our church setting we may resist efforts to include us or bring us close to others. We keep them at bay with criticism or with the comment that we are too busy 'doing our own thing'.



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Ironically, the very system we use for protecting ourselves becomes that which alienates us from others and so easily leads to emptiness in relationship and ultimately to loneliness. **So we need to befriend ourselves.** We need to make space and time and begin to care for those alienated parts of ourselves, to find and make that inner community. Without it, all our efforts to find it with others will fail.

From God's perspective

God created us for community, to belong to a body and to have a place among people which we can call 'home'. The Lord's prayer begins with the call 'Our Father . . .', not 'My Father'. As a community we call on our loving Father to draw us to wholeness and maturity. Our wholeness becomes a reality in the context of our community; **we cannot be 'whole' in isolation.** God did not make us to be 'lone rangers'.

Just as there is a balance between our inner and our outer life, so there must be a balance between our solitary life and our community life. If either takes undue precedence, we become unbalanced and distorted. Our Lord himself discerned his need for solitude, but also his need to have close intimacy and companionship with his disciples. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:12–27 that 'the body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts . . . Now you are the body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it.'

Just as we need every part and area in ourselves to be a whole body, so we need one another. We each need the gifts and abilities of every other person just as we need each part of our own body, our eyes, ears and every other part. By being a part of this community body, we are responsible to it and have to be our unique and real self in it. We do not choose one another, but where we find ourselves is where God is working with us. The people in our group, particularly those who may 'rub us up the wrong way', may well be the ones God has allowed into our lives to make us see how much hidden conflict there is within us. Moving away from any situation because it does not suit us may well indicate an inner resistance: Not 'thy will be done' but rather 'my will be done'. This may also be the case with our work situation or wherever else we feel uncomfortable and would rather move away from the problem.

It is in the problem that, with God, we find our salvation; it is here that he gives us life. If we run from the situation or from the people that he has allowed into our lives, we are merely avoiding the issues and not allowing God to be Lord in our lives. We will meet similar people and difficulties in the next situation and will have to face ourselves again. We cannot escape from ourselves.

- In what ways are we answerable to each other in relationships as Christians?
- How can we love someone from a distance?
- How can we love ourselves if we do not face ourselves?

Reflect on the above and on your experiences of seeking or avoiding intimacy. (30 minutes)

Journal and **share** as is felt appropriate.

During the week, identify and make a point of befriending each part of your Inner Community. With God, pray through the inner alienation and isolation you have caused yourself by relating with yourself conditionally and selectively.



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