

Hope Month – Proximity

INTRO

Back when I ran my photojournalism non-profit, World Next Door, I did whatever I could to get as deep into the culture as possible, wherever I went. I wanted to understand what life was really like for those facing injustice.

So, when I was embedded with Grace’s partner, New York City Relief, I chose to spend four days/three nights **homeless in Manhattan**. I slept on the floor of Penn Station, I checked into a homeless shelter, I ate at soup kitchens.

Now, obviously it wasn’t the real thing. I had a cheap flip phone in case of emergencies. I had a metro card. I could have walked away at any time if I wanted to.

But I did go into this experience **without any money** or credit card. If I wanted to eat outside of soup kitchens, I had to panhandle for it. So I did.

On my first day I went into a subway stairwell during rush hour and started begging for money. “Sir, do you have a quarter?” “Ma’am, can you spare a dollar?”

It quickly became one of the most **dehumanizing** and isolating experiences of my entire life. It didn’t take long for me to realize that people wouldn’t just not give me money. They wouldn’t even look at me.

They walked by as if I wasn’t there. Some accidentally made eye contact and then quickly looked away. It was as if I was **less than human**. My presence was a problem.

Literally 15 minutes of this and I wanted to stand up and scream, “will someone just acknowledge that I exist?”

Every now and then a person would give me a quarter or even just **look me in**

the eyes and say, “Sorry man, I can’t help you.” And it felt so good to be acknowledged I wanted to give them a hug! But those interactions were so, so rare.

After 45 minutes of this I called it quits. I couldn’t take it anymore. **The isolation stung too deeply.**

Again, I was just pretending. I had a way out. Imagining if that was my *life* changed my perspective of homelessness forever.

But it also opened my eyes to **the emotional toll of isolation** in a way I had never understood before.

SERIES INTRO

This is week 4 of our series, Never Alone, focused on what it means to heal the broken place of isolation.

Since starting this series, **several of you have reached** out to share your own stories of feeling alone.

I heard from one lonely person who said they’ve **put themselves out there** again and again, but always find themselves on the outside looking in.

Another person told me that because of his health concerns he’s not comfortable to public places yet, so most of the relationships he had at work and church have shriveled up. **Out of sight, out of mind**, right?

I’ve heard from a **recent widow** who is trying to do many of the social things she used to do with her late husband, but now she feels invisible. She comes to church but people walk right by her.

There are many different kinds of isolation, but the effect is the same. In a community meant to be spiritual family, many of us are finding ourselves increasingly alone, especially in this pandemic.

And that's not even mentioning the **epidemic of isolation** in the world around us.

We've got our work cut out for us, but it's why we're here. Grace Church is called to heal the broken places of our world in Jesus' name, including isolation. So let's keep at it.

As a reminder, throughout this series we have a bunch of **resources** available on our website. Just scroll down on the main page or go to gracechurch.us/hope

If you're looking to support someone isolated, or if you're feeling isolated yourself, you can **sign up** there and meet each other! **[image: website]**

And I know we're saying this a lot, but the very best *practical* way for you to find spiritual family here at Grace is to go through **Rooted**. Yes, it's a big commitment. But if you want to be known, that's the best place to start.

Ok. Quick recap of where we've been.

In the first week, I said that the path out of isolation begins with **dignity**. Seeing the image of God in one another.

In the second week, Tim showed us what **hospitality** look like. Opening up our lives to those in need of community.

Last week, Maron painted the picture of what isolation looks like when it's healed: **unity**.

And today, we're going to talk about a vital ingredient in healing isolation: **proximity**.

ENCOUNTERING THE LEPER

To do that, we're going to look at another story of Jesus encountering an

isolated person. So grab your Bibles and turn to **Luke 5:12**

While you're doing that, I just have to share this... We adopted a puppy. **[Images: Cleo 1, 2, 3]** Her name is Cleo. This has nothing to do with the message. We just all need a little joy right now, right?

Alright. Luke 5. By this point in Luke's gospel, Jesus' ministry of healing and teaching is just starting to pick up steam when this happens:

Luke 5:12-16

In one of the villages, Jesus met a man with an advanced case of leprosy. When the man saw Jesus, he bowed with his face to the ground, begging to be healed. "Lord," he said, "if you are willing, you can heal me and make me clean."

Jesus reached out and touched him. "I am willing," he said. "Be healed!" And instantly the leprosy disappeared. Then Jesus instructed him not to tell anyone what had happened. He said, "Go to the priest and let him examine you. Take along the offering required in the law of Moses for those who have been healed of leprosy. This will be a public testimony that you have been cleansed."

But despite Jesus' instructions, the report of his power spread even faster, and vast crowds came to hear him preach and to be healed of their diseases. But Jesus often withdrew to the wilderness for prayer.

Let's start with this. What is leprosy?

Well, there's a modern-day disease called leprosy (Hansen's Disease). It's a bacterial infection that affects the skin and nervous system. But in the Bible the word "leprosy" described **a range of different skin conditions**. Everything from psoriasis to the effects of mold and mildew.

And in the ancient Jewish world, all of those things were a **recipe for isolation**.

Remember, these were the days before antibiotics, before germ theory.

No one knew for sure whether that rash on your body was contagious or possibly even deadly. It was better to keep your distance from someone with a skin disease.

Which is why, in the Old Testament **law of Moses**, there are pretty detailed regulations for how to deal with this kind of stuff.

If you had what the Bible calls “leprosy,” you were considered **spiritually unclean**. Which meant you couldn’t worship at the temple, you couldn’t participate in community events. You couldn’t even shake a hand.

If someone touched you *they* became spiritually unclean as well.

In fact, to make sure this spiritual (and sometimes physical) contagion was contained, when lepers were in public, they were required to wear torn clothing, mess up their hair, and yell, “**unclean, unclean!**” as they walked through town.

Can you imagine that? The humiliation? The isolation?

Being a leper was like being a zombie - **the living dead**. Isolated from community, exempt from human touch, and completely dependent on the compassion of others for basic survival.

So that’s a glimpse at what this man may have been experiencing when he encountered Jesus.

Look back at verse 12. Is it any wonder he “bowed with his face to the ground”? The man was desperate.

“If you are willing, you can heal me and make me clean.” In other words, you can end this living hell of isolation. You can bring me back to life. Wow.

Now, the *fact* that Jesus heals this man is wonderful. It plays a big role in establishing who he is as the Messiah, it's great. But what I want to focus on today is *how* he heals him. Because it goes way beyond physical healing.

He doesn't just heal this man's body; He heals his *isolation*.

All through the gospels we see Jesus healing people in a lot of different ways. Sometimes he **speaks** and they're healed. Sometimes he **prays** first. One time he **spits** on the ground and rubs some mud on a blind man's eyes. So we know he could have healed this man in a lot of different ways.

But what does he do? Look at verse 13.

"Jesus reached out and *touched* him."

Think about that. After all of what we just talked about. **He *touched* the man** - the spiritually unclean, untouchable leper. He got close to him. He broke through the bubble.

Under normal circumstances, that would have meant *boom* - instantly Jesus would have become **unclean** and, *maybe*, could have **caught the disease**.

This would have been a shocking move for those looking on. "The rabbi just touched him! The rabbi is unclean!!!"

Except, that isn't what happened, is it? Jesus didn't take the man's spiritual uncleanliness on himself. No. **It was reversed**. The cleanliness of Jesus transferred to the man!

The touch of the Messiah reversed the flow of shame... Jesus was willing to be in close proximity to this isolated man when no one else was.

Think about it. Without his skin disease marking him as untouchable, this man could **re-enter society**. He could go to public gatherings again. He could be touched and hugged and held.

Jesus healed this man, but he healed **way more than just his body**. He healed his shame.

There's one other part of this small story we often overlook. It's in verse 14, where Jesus tells the man, "Go to the priest and let him examine you. Take along the offering required in the law of Moses for those who have been healed of leprosy."

This seems like a bit of **bureaucracy** after an amazing miracle ("You're going to have to head down to the local leprosy administration office and fill out the cleansing by miracle certification form 899B..."), but it's actually really important.

You see, Jesus knew that, until this man is officially, legally certified as "spiritually clean," until the priests could give him their seal of approval and say "his leprosy is *gone*," **there would always be a shadow hanging over him**.

There would always be doubt - hesitation - among his neighbors. "Is he really clean?"

Again, Jesus is **not interested in just healing this man's body**. He also wants to heal his isolation. Go to the temple. "This will be a *public* testimony that you have been cleansed."

One interesting note here... In verse 15 it says that reports of Jesus' power spread and huge crowds started seeking him out. The other gospel accounts of this miracle make a bigger deal of the fact that Jesus tells the man, "Don't tell anyone about this. Just go straight to the priests."

But in those accounts - in Matthew and Mark - the man goes off and tells

everyone anyway. Which causes **problems for Jesus** because then he's inundated by people. At that point the only chance he can get any rest or quiet is if he goes off into the wilderness (which wasn't a camping trip... it was *hard* and dangerous).

So you could say that by performing this miracle, **Jesus willingly disrupted his own work/life balance**. I'm sure he knew that was going to happen, but he still did it. It's interesting.

All that to say, it's a really simple story, but it says a lot about healing isolation.

To bring this hurting man back into community, **Jesus touches him**. He risks the **social stigma** of becoming unclean himself. He risks catching whatever the man has. *And* he risks his own time and energy knowing that word of this miracle would spread.

Jesus could have snapped his fingers and waved the man away secretly healed. But he got close because he wanted *everyone* to know this man was now clean.

Jesus saw this man's dignity and willingly risked it all because he understood that,

Healing isolation requires proximity.

What would happen if we did the same?

RISKING IT ALL

Now, I know what many of you are thinking. "Proximity? Really? Isn't that exactly **the thing we're not supposed to have right now**? Aren't we *not* supposed to touch each other or get close? How do you have proximity with social distancing?"

Great questions. Let's talk about it.

When Jesus healed this leper he crossed what I'll call a "**threshold of fear**."

And it's the same threshold *we* have to cross if *we* want to love those who are isolated.

For example, Jesus had to face **the fear of becoming spiritually unclean** by touching a leper. It would change how people looked at him.

Today we don't think of things as clean or unclean, but we sure do have a fear of losing our status, don't we?

Have you ever **felt bad for that lonely kid** in school or that **isolated coworker** and wanted to reach out but then thought, "I can't be seen talking to them."

Or have you ever encountered someone **awkward** or **unpopular** and thought, "I don't want people to think we're friends. It'll make *me* look bad."

Proximity - even virtual proximity - requires we cross that threshold of fear.

Maybe, like leprosy you're afraid that **you might "catch" whatever they have**. Unpopularity, weirdness, dysfunction, pain... Are you willing to reach out if you know that it might affect you?

Maybe you're afraid of **what it might cost you** to get close to someone who's isolated. It cost Jesus his peace and quiet.

Maybe you're worried if you reach out to that elderly neighbor they're going to talk your ear off and take up all your free time.

Or maybe if you talk to that homeless person you'll be unsafe.

Maybe if you reach out to that isolated teenager who just wants to gripe about how hard life is, they'll sap all your energy.

- That struggling addict could take your money.
- That isolated widow could drain your emotions.
- That friend in an abusive relationship might bring some pain into your life.

I'll say it again. **Healing isolation requires proximity.** But proximity can be costly!

And yet, **Jesus touched the leper.** He risked his own cleanliness to bring healing to the man. He sacrificed his own work-life balance by letting word of his miracles spread. Despite the cost, he chose proximity with an isolated man, and the result was healing.

When I was **panhandling** in New York, as I said most people ignored me. They didn't want to get close. They didn't want to make eye contact with me. They didn't want to cross the threshold of fear. And it was devastating.

But at one point, a young man walked up to me, looked me in the eyes, gave me a \$5 bill, and said, "Hey man, I hope you get through this."

I took that \$5 to a hot dog stand and bought dinner. As I ate I wept. Not because of the money. Not because of the food.

But because in the subway stairwell I felt more isolated, more dehumanized, than I had ever been. And in that moment **this man saw me and he chose proximity.**

Again, I know my experience was just a taste. 4 days homeless. 45 minutes panhandling. It's nothing compared to the real thing. But I'll tell you. I will remember that act of kindness for the rest of my life.

Proximity heals isolation.

What if that was how we all lived - how we approached the isolated in our world? What if we, **Grace Church**, collectively crossed through the threshold

of fear. What if we chose proximity?

We've said it so much in this series already. Our world is chronically isolated, painfully lonely. It's killing us.

I believe it's time for us to be the hands and feet of Jesus and **touch the leper**, choose proximity, and watch as God's healing flows through us and into our broken world.

REACHING OUT

Here's what I want you to do.

Take a moment right now and think of one person in your life who is isolated. It could be any kind of isolation - physical, mental, emotional. Family member, co-worker, classmate, neighbor... Get that person in your mind.

And here's what I want you ask God right now: **what would proximity look like for them?** Again, it doesn't have to be physical proximity. What does it mean for you to reach out? To get close?

What is the Holy Spirit inviting you to do right now? And are you willing to do it?

While you're praying about that, I want to turn to **those of you who feel isolated** yourself right now. For any reason. I want to remind you of something.

In this story the leper had **every reason to stay away**. He might have been yelled at by the crowd, ridiculed, rejected by this rabbi... it could have been humiliating. And yet he chose to fall on his face before Jesus. He put himself out there to find healing.

Will you do the same? **Will you put yourself out there?** Will you stop believing the lies about your self-worth?

Stop walking the streets shouting “**unclean, unclean!**” You belong in our spiritual family. We want to be close to you.

Now, nobody in this church is Jesus. We are all imperfect, and we will let you down at times. But, as Maron said last week, isolation likes to hide in the shadows. Don’t stay in the darkness.

Be bold and make your isolation known. On our website, through a conversation, through texting someone...

I can’t guarantee your life is going to suddenly turn into **an episode of Friends**, but you may very well experience the glimmer of light you’ve been waiting for.

We’re not afraid to be in proximity to you. Because you are a part of our family. And in the kingdom of God, you are never alone.

[PRAY]