

If there's one thing I've learned during this pandemic, it is how we all are struggling with loneliness.

It's not a state of emotion that I thought I was familiar with. As a priest I'm rarely lonely—I see people every day. My vocation centers around meeting people in worship, meeting people in sickness, and meeting people in distress, or in any one of a number of big events in the life of a person.

Little did I know on March 15, when we last met, that I would soon be meeting distress in myself.

In the first days of the shelter in place order, I felt calmer-- like life had suddenly lost some of it's frantic rushing. I noticed things outside the house that I'd never had the time to notice before. Since working from home was so new—I could take the time to think through what needed to happen each day in this new world of physical distancing, without rushing from meeting to meeting.

But somewhere along the line—maybe around late May-- I started feeling edgy again.

I felt I wasn't doing enough. I got the sense from some that I wasn't doing things right. I was finding it hard to conquer my phone phobia. I couldn't get everyone interested in the internet services we were offering, and so -- I was letting everyone down.

I was working so many hours, but I didn't have the sense that I was making any difference. I'm sure some of you probably felt the same way doing your work—especially if you were also suddenly watching your children 24/7. Our youth were feeling all the pressure of finishing their school year—without their friends and graduation to look forward to. Even those of you who aren't working may have felt cut off and not able to contribute through your individual and shared ministries.

So there some of us were: feeling vaguely dissatisfied, like we weren't enough. And I found I was getting lonely.

Then my father went into the hospital, and I was overwhelmed with grief that someone had to go through something like a hospital stay—with or without

dementia—without anyone to be with them. To hold their hand. To explain where they were.

And I kept reading stories about people dying of COVID 19 without any of their family allowed in while they passed from this life to the next. And I couldn't imagine their loneliness.

Then my dad died. By the mercy of God a nurse called me against her supervisor's instructions so that my mom and Gwen and I could sneak in and have a few hours with him. To say goodbye.

I was so grateful that we had that, but my throat ached constantly as I thought about those who never got to do that. How alone those 120 thousand people who have died in the pandemic—and who continue to die--must have felt, and feel--without someone to be there. Where they afraid?

Then I saw a news story about a man who finally got his 97 year old mom to be able to sign onto Zoom, and I watched as she saw him face to face for the first time in months. She burst into tears as she said, "Oh! I love you. I love you. I miss you so much. I want to see you..." I just cried.

Now— while I love seeing many of you on Zoom, I don't love how I can see MYSELF on Zoom, while I talk to everyone.

I certainly don't need to see what my house looks like behind me, or what I look like when I'm having a really bad hair day. And I miss seeing the "real" you. The person in the flesh. Each of you precious children of God.

And I'm sure I'm not alone. We all want to hug someone. We all want to see each other in person. Let's be honest—we all just want to go out and grab a hamburger & a drink with someone.

We want to stop being lonely, and afraid.

Hear the words of our Lord. Hear the words Jesus says this morning:

"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows."

If you hear nothing else from this sermon, I want you to hear this:
Do not be afraid. You are precious to God.

I'll say it again: Do not be afraid. *You are precious to God.*

Even when we fall, even when we get angry about the pandemic, even when we are tired of wearing our masks, even when we are lonely: God is with us. God is saying, "My beloved children: I am with you. See me in every single person you meet, because I am there.

Sometimes we can feel we are vulnerable to everything-- but God is there to protect us. If we can lean into the moment where God feels most absent-- where we feel the loneliness the most keenly—it might allow God to show us how very present he is. Because God is everywhere. In every experience. In every moment we are experiencing. When we are most lonely or scared, or feeling overwhelmed, we can open our hearts to God-- who shows us what we are made of: vigor and strength, kindness and trust.

In the dark time, the eye begins to see.

As Frederick Buechner says: "*Lord, catch us off guard today. Surprise us with some moment of beauty or pain so that for at least a moment we may be startled into seeing that you are with us here in all your splendor, always and everywhere, barely hidden, beneath, beyond, within this life we breathe.*"

Do not be afraid. Even the hairs on our heads are counted. And God's hands are holding us all. Amen.