

**Sunday Worship, November 5, 2023**  
**Message: Terribly Lonely**  
**Rev. Irene Willis Hassan**

**Scriptures**

**Romans 15:1-7**

15 We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. 2 Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up. 3 For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.”[a] 4 For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.

5 May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, 6 so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

7 Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

**John 13:34-35**

34 “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

**Sermon: Terribly Lonely**

As you look around this church, you’ll notice a lack of young people. I’ve delivered a variation of this sermon to you before – that essentially young people have abandoned the church because it feels like a judgmental social club that doesn’t offer enough positive change to the ailments of society to be worth their time.

I’m delivering that same sermon to you again, because now we have a potential vision together about how to faithfully address that. At the vision retreat, you all favored keeping the church autonomous from outside influence, that is, other churches and non-profits taking over the property. Obviously, to grow the church autonomously, we have to bring the young people back. This means addressing their concerns directly about the church being a judgmental social club that doesn’t impact positive change for the community.

We have to try to understand their concern because statistically, the young people didn’t leave God, they just left the church. Research is consistent across the board that people under the age of 30 overwhelmingly believe in God, and also have favorable views of Jesus. We see this playing out in our seminaries. Young people are still following a call from God to serve Him – they just don’t want to do it in a church. I’ve been in conversation with several seminaries in the past few weeks, asking if their students would be interested in doing an internship in Hawaii with a focused mission of helping a declining church grow. The staff I speak to often get squeamish about that question and

respond apologetically that almost none of their students are interested in pastoral ministry – they all want to be Chaplains.

I tell those staff people that I 100% identify with their students, and that I was a chaplain for most of my career because I shared their sentiment. When young people read the words of Jesus about loving one another, or Paul's encouragement to build up our neighbors, we didn't see it in the churches. I know, I know – you look around and say, "Why?! We love each other so much!" I've been told so many stories of all the ways you've loved each other in the ways Jesus and Paul asked us to. I've heard stories and seen many live examples of the ways that you show up for each other in overflowing abundance. You live into the faithful call for empowering your community that the Bible asks you for.

But I want you to think about how people my age and younger grew up. My generation, which is essentially the first generation that has overwhelmingly abandoned the church, grew up with constant access to information with the internet. We've been raised in a world in which we could never turn off the voice of justice calling out for change from corners of the world both near and far. We're part of a worldwide community now that goes beyond our immediate neighbors and the limits of our contextual experiences. We've been trained by the realities of today to be vigilant and purposeful in response to the constant barrage of information that we digest daily. My generation understands the meaning of "loving one another" as going into places where we see people starving for love on our screens, like homeless shelters, prisons, and war zones.

We open TikTok and see in real time Israelis and Palestinians brutally dying, we see unarmed black men getting murdered at traffic stops, we see Ukrainians crying as bombs rain down on their heads. We see kids shooting up their schools on Facebook livestream. Our hearts connect to the screens and we scream alongside the screaming we see. And then we walk into a church and all we see is people living their lives like nothing is happening and doing or saying nothing to stop the madness.

And maybe the young people are right. There's a lot to learn from their courageous leap into the parts of society that need healing and bringing God's love there. Maybe we should be inspired by their bravery and go dramatically love those in our world who are starving for it.

Because of the calling in our hearts to act on the constant suffering we see from the comfort of our homes, we began to equate love with purpose. Love, for the younger generation, is purposefully going out in the world and doing everything we can to end suffering. And who goes out in the world with this intention? Not churches. Chaplains do, by job description. Chaplains are in hospitals, shelters, schools, anywhere where they can hold in loving care the voice of suffering and direct it to God. So we abandoned local church ministry for chaplaincy.

But this sort of purposeful courage acted out in places of devastation needs to be

supported by a solid foundation. Purpose can easily turn into something overwhelming and chaotic without that foundation for it to rest upon. As a chaplain and social service worker, I saw a lot of that unstable foundation. When I was working to build refugee schools in the Middle East, many of my colleagues seemed to have lifestyles that reflected the chaotic nature of the situations we served in. There were long nights of alcoholic parties, broken marriages, and a general sense of spiritual unwellness among the people I served alongside. I had massive respect for them and the courageous work they did, but also a deep sadness that their personal lives were so fraught as a result of their constant engagement with the darkness. In those spaces, there was often an atmosphere of the Rogue Hero: the Chaplain, the service worker, the volunteer doctor, all individually fighting against the darkness. And that atmosphere felt terribly lonely.

That sense of volatile sadness and individual heroism transferred to IHS as well. The role of Chaplain itself is in many ways separated from different social service careers. Military chaplains are the only military occupation that don't carry guns. Hospice Chaplains are the only hospice occupation that don't administer medical care. In the same way, being the Chaplain at IHS was indeed a lonely island. Chaplains, in any social service setting from schools, to hospitals, to homeless shelters, are sort of thought of as a luxury. Chaplains are often viewed by our colleagues as not really doing any of the concrete, vital work of building growth in their populations. The case managers and outreach workers felt that while they had loads of standardized reporting to do every day, I was just freely praying and partying with people. Why should I get paid for that? It's not fair, the case managers and outreach workers thought, when we're doing the work that actually gets these people into housing. And that atmosphere felt terribly lonely.

While I was directing Refugee Services for UCC National, I finally saw the consistent problem. I watched through my administrative Zoom room all the amazing things that churches were doing to help people. I wanted to be part of a community that was doing something to impact the world, not give out money to them from behind a computer. And that felt terribly lonely.

Chaplains are designed to give companionship and community, which is not organically what the fast paced and regimental environment of hospitals or war zones offer. It often felt like being a chaplain was trying to shoot love into places that were designed for the opposite and that, indeed, was a terribly lonely thing to try to do.

This is another statistic (because you all know I love statistics) of our generation – we're lonely. All of our courage and purpose has nowhere to rest as we look at our flimsy social service paychecks and grow bitter as the wave of suffering we try to alleviate never seems to cease. We get onto the internet and go into online forums of people who share our passions and concerns, only to find that those spaces are full of anonymous anger and divisiveness from far away. You can't reach through a screen to touch someone or have a meal with them. If you're angry or disagree with someone on a screen, you can just scroll past and change your algorithm. Our generation's way of trying to connect, of trying to address in community the suffering that we so deeply long

to change, feels terribly lonely.

We've done away with our social institutions that brought us together, like churches and elk lodges and bowling leagues, and replaced it with the anonymous yelling and biased algorithms of the internet. And it's so frustrating because we feel like we can't win. The social institutions failed us and failed to change the world in the ways we needed, but the strategy of the Rogue Hero vs The World just makes us feel ever increasingly alone. And the Rogue Hero strategy doesn't seem to be working – violence, war, and division continue and are even increasing, despite our attempts to address it.

This church has an opportunity to help the young people have both the purposeful action they crave and the stable community to support them. We can invite young Chaplaincy students to come do dynamic, vitalizing work of serving the poor and ministering as the Rogue Hero in places of suffering by connecting them to IHS or Na Anela or even the women's prison down the street. We can hold those same students in a loving community where they have more offered to them than the anonymous yelling and doomsday scrolling of the internet while they navigate this call.

Look into your souls and think of your history of acting out Romans 15's call to build up our neighbors or John 13's call to love one another. Remember back through all the history of creating prayer chains, visiting each other through times of trial, and wrapping each other in love.

You and the young people you could serve on this property through a Service Learning Community can mutually learn from each other what Jesus means when he says "love one another" or "build up our neighbors." We have two different interpretations of what those phrases mean that has caused a massive generational gap. Young people see those words to mean living out our purpose in places of high need; the older generation thinks it means to gather as a community and invite everyone to come belong in it. Neither of these interpretations are wrong, but the problem is they're just not communicating with each other.

And to all of us, that feels terribly lonely.

You don't have to feel terribly lonely anymore in all the stretched commitments you make to the church. You don't have to feel lonely taking on the leadership position again that no one else will take; you don't have to feel terribly lonely being the only person consistently responsible for whatever task needs to be done to maintain the church. The younger generation doesn't need to feel terribly lonely in all the passion they have for the world and no one to hold their hand through it. They don't have to be terribly lonely watching terrible things happening from afar and no one to talk to about it. We have a mutual goal of loving one another and building up our neighbors. So let's start listening to each other and fulfill the Gospel mission of transforming the world together, young and old together, purposeful and mindful together, one body of Christ together.

Amen.