

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
The Spirit at Work: Companionship  
The Rev. Dr. John Judson  
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2 Samuel 15:13-23; Acts 28:11-15

He was unbelievably lonely. He felt isolated and forgotten. His loneliness was taking a toll. But then, unexpectedly he made a friend. It was if his friend just appeared in his life. Suddenly life was worth living again. He and his friend ate together. They had long, if sometimes, one-sided conversations. They walked together. Soon they were inseparable. Days, weeks and months flew by, yet they never grew tired of each other. But then the unthinkable happened. They were out in the surf when his friend was swept away. He called to this friend over and over but to no avail. Wilson was gone. They would never meet again. If you are not familiar with this story, it is the outline of Tom Hanks movie, *Castaway*, in which Hanks plays a Fed-Ex systems engineer who is on his way to Malaysia to resolve an issue, when his plane crashes in the Pacific and he manages to float to a deserted Pacific island. Desperate for company he finds some packages, one of which has a volleyball inside...made by, you guessed it, Wilson. Hanks paints a face on a volleyball, names it Wilson and they become best friends. While to some people this might seem a silly plot line, I find it plausible because I believe that we human beings are genetically wired for community, for companionship and so we will go to almost any length not to be isolated and lonely.

When I say that we humans are hardwired for companionship, for being in community, I say that first because humans have always gathered into clans, tribes and communities. In fact, this past year there was a discovery of a highly organized nine-thousand-year-old Neolithic community. I say this second because study after study shows the deleterious effects of loneliness. What loneliness does is that it causes the body to produce stress hormones such as cortisol. And over a long period of time those hormones do damage to the body. It leads to high blood pressure, increased inflammation and a weakened immune system. One study showed that it has the same effects as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. In addition, without a support system people slip into bad habits, depression and become more politically polarized because, as Senator Ben Sasse wrote, when we are isolated from one another all we can do is shriek at each other. And my friends this matters because we are in a loneliness epidemic. This was first pointed out in Putnam's book Bowling Alone in which he described the slow but steady erosion of social capital and networks. Other studies showed that from 1985 to 2009, the average American's social network shrunk by more than one third. Some people argue that social media helps connect us, but the top consumers of social media in the age group of 19-25 feel lonelier than their peers. With all that having been said I need to note two things. First loneliness is not new. It is at the heart of both of our stories this morning. Second, while both of our stories offer us a look at loneliness, they also offer us a possible way out.

First, the story of David. By the time of our tale, David has grown old and is losing his popularity and his hold on the Kingdom. Sensing this, David's eldest son, Absalom, plots a takeover of the Kingdom, a

palace coup if you will. It is only by God's grace that David learns of this plot and escapes. His escape is not a hurried exodus from Jerusalem, but it is almost a farewell tour, as if he expects to be caught and killed. The only people who go with him are his loyalists. His loneliness can be seen in the moment when Ittai the Gittite, and his six-hundred men try to go with David. The king essentially says, no you stay, I will be fine, just let me get caught. David is surrounded by his friends, yet he feels so all alone that he rejects the offer from Ittai. Second the story of Paul. Our story comes from the end of the book of Acts. Paul has arrived in Rome accompanied by, we assume, a few close friends. But he arrives in Rome, not because he was on vacation, but because he was under arrest. Along the way he had been shipwrecked, threatened with death, bitten by a poisonous snake, and otherwise inconvenienced. I'm not sure we can imagine as well how small he feels when he arrives in pagan grandeur of Rome. It must have made him feel small and insignificant. We can surmise this because we are told in verse 15 that he takes courage, meaning he had lost his. Both famous figures felt lonely, yet at the same time they discovered a way out of their loneliness...and that was to remember that they had companions along the way.

I realize that what I am about to say is one of those "duh" statements, but I will say it anyway. Loneliness can be helped by realizing that we are not really alone...that we do have companions on our journey's. David believed himself to be alone, even with his royal household all around him. But suddenly in his response to Ittai's offer, I think that he realized he was not alone. When he said to Ittai, "you also are an exile from your home", it began to trigger something in David. It made him realize that he and Ittai shared a common journey. They were both exiles searching for companionship. And so when Ittai signs on to go with David, the king relents and finds a Wilson to go with him; a Wilson to be his companion along the way. This same process happens with Paul. He has arrived in Rome feeling low and alone. But then people come from as far as the "Forum of Appius and Three Taverns" to meet him, it dawns on him that the Spirit has not left him alone. The Spirit has given him companions on this dangerous and difficult journey. In that realization, then he takes courage. He has been given a bunch of Wilsons.

Loneliness can and often does come to us all. And when it does, it can create its own self-reinforcing cycle. It is only when something happens to remind us that we are not alone, that the cycle can be broken. This morning then I want to offer everyone here an opportunity to be reminded that they are not alone. That we are surrounded by Wilsons. We are surrounded by companions along the way. What you are invited to do is to come forward to renew your baptism; to be marked again with the waters of the font as a reminder that the Spirit has made us all to be part of a single, world-wide family. And as you come forward, or remain where you are, to look around you at all who come to the font and know that they are your companions, they are your family.