

Jesus and Paradigms of Loneliness

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My clinical context is Mississippi, widely regarded as the most religious and Christian-affiliated state in the country.¹ Elder care recipients tend to be both very devout and very lonely, a combination that can be challenging for multiple reasons. These include the tendency to use spiritual bypassing² to deny the existence of social isolation as a valid problem and the tendency to feel guilt or shame when aging-related decline in health results in decreased church attendance, as it often does.³ Combine these factors with the well-documented positive role that church attendance can play in mitigating loneliness,⁴ and it becomes easy, perhaps inevitable, to adopt a sort of social-emotional prosperity gospel⁵ that teaches loneliness is a sign of weak faith and perhaps even divine punishment for not attending church.

Every chaplain who has worked with devout Christians in a hospital context has probably used the biblical precedents I like to use when people are too hard on themselves. If they see grief as a sign of weak faith, I remind them that even Jesus cried at Lazarus's tomb (John 11:35); if they're struggling with their reaction to difficult news about a diagnosis, I remind them that Jesus sweated blood at Gethsemane and asked if the cup could pass from him (Luke 22). One of the recurring themes in the life of Jesus is his strangeness, his isolation from the normal rhythms of life; loneliness is a throughline in his story. If you work with devout Christian elders who are dealing with religious guilt and shame, you may find illustrations from the Gospels useful as brief interventions.

In *Loneliness* (1973), Robert Weiss distinguishes what he calls "the loneliness of emotional isolation" from "the loneliness of social isolation."⁶ The loneliness of emotional isolation is, in effect, negative loneliness; it's the loneliness that comes when you're deprived of the current version of the "primary, security-providing attachment"⁷ that has changed phase over the course of your life. For some, it might be a parent; for others, a partner; for others still, a child or particularly close friend. It's not grief, but it's also inextricable from grief.

When Jesus "withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself" (Matthew 14:13) after the death of John the Baptist, that can be read as a grief reaction, acute emotional loneliness, or both. The same can be said of the "behold your mother"/ "behold your son" moment in John 19:26, or Jesus weeping at the tomb of Lazarus in John 11:35. Depending on the care recipient's theology (this must be approached carefully), it can even be said of

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“Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” (Matthew 27:46) with respect to Jesus’ sense of being abandoned by God, which can be the loss of a very real personal relationship for deeply religious people.

Weiss’s concept of social loneliness can be framed as positive loneliness, the lack of a sense of general community support, the lack of an opportunity to proactively bond. It’s the sort of loneliness typically measured in U.S. questionnaires targeted to assess the World Health Organization’s Social Determinants of Health,⁸ and it shows up, too, in the life of Jesus—most noticeably in his homelessness (Matthew 8:20), when he’s laughed out of his own hometown (Mark 6), when his disciples abandon him at Gethsemane (Matthew 26:40), and when he’s on the cross (Matthew 26:56).

My discussion of the broad categories of loneliness above is inspired in large part by Kimberley Smith’s “Charting Loneliness” (2019),⁹ which draws on the work of Robert S. Weiss, Jenny de Jong Gierveld, and Clark Moustakas to create the outline of a model of loneliness along three spectrums: social-emotional (Weiss), situational-chronic (de Jong Gierveld), and anxious-existential (Moustakas). For simplicity’s sake, I’ve focused on Weiss’ social-emotional dyad, but for those of us who work with lonely Christian and Christian-grounded clients (I work with many), the life of Jesus can be a powerful way to validate negative emotions—and the strength, faith, and resilience of the people who experience them.

NOTES

¹ Pew Research Center, “Adults in Mississippi,”

<https://www.pewresearch.org/religious-landscape-study/database/state/mississippi/>.

² The term “spiritual bypassing” was coined by Buddhist scholar John Welwood in “Principles of Inner Work: Psychological and Spiritual,” *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 16, no. 1 (1984): 64–65.

³ One particularly strong source on this point is Richard G. Cowden et al., “Identifying Pathways to Religious Service Attendance among Older Adults: A Lagged Exposure-Wide Analysis,” *PLoS One* 17, no. 11 (November 2022). The authors identify functional physical limitations as a key factor in reduced church attendance among the elderly (see Table 2).

⁴ Cowden et al., “Identifying Pathways.”

⁵ The idea of an “emotional prosperity gospel,” which teaches that faith is rewarded by uninterrupted happiness, shows up in the work of numerous authors. Amanda Held Opelt’s *Holy Unhappiness: God, Goodness, and the Myth of the Blessed Life* (New York: Worthy Publishing, 2023) explores this idea extensively.

⁶ Robert Weiss, *Loneliness* (1973), 20.

⁷ Robert Weiss, *Loneliness* (1973), 93

⁸ See, for example, Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services, “The Accountable Health Communities Health-Related Social Needs Screening Tool,”

<https://www.cms.gov/priorities/innovation/files/worksheets/ahcm-screeningtool.pdf>.

⁹ Kimberley Smith, “Charting Loneliness,” *RSA Journal* 165, no. 1 (2019): 38–41.