



Sunday Sermon
January 18, 2026
The Rt. Rev. James R. Mathes

Epiphany II

Corinthians 1: 1-9
John 1: 29-43

*Come Holy Spirit: Touch our minds and think with them, touch our lips and speak with them and touch our hearts and set them on fire with love for you. **AMEN.***

In the early 1970's, the Irish singer-song writer, Gilbert O'Sullivan, recorded a song that became billboard hit and became a favorite our teen dances. It was the melody that drew us in. I don't think we paid attention to the lyrics which are quite melancholic with contemplations of suicide, questioning God's existence, the loss of parents. If you remember the song, it's likely because of its simple refrain, "Alone again, naturally." In the middle stanza, Gilbert sings of words that resonate across the decades to our day:

It seems to me that
There are more hearts broken in the world
That can't be mended
Left unattended
What do we do
What do we do
Alone again, naturally.(1)

To be sure, the song was tapping into what people felt in a time of great social dislocation in the 60s and 70s. However, sociologists will tell us that since that ballad was penned, we humans have become more solitary, more isolated - lonelier. In 2018 the United Kingdom, followed by Japan, established a minister of loneliness. In 2023, the Surgeon General in the United States, asserted that the nation was experiencing an epidemic of loneliness. (2) In Canada, this epidemic particularly hits individuals over 50 and those under 25. Women, LGBTQ+ individuals, people with disabilities, immigrants, those living alone, are also disproportionately affected.

We go further into our phones, laptops, and smart pads. We live in social media echo chambers where political and social bias, anger, fears, and resentments are amplified. We see authoritarians across the border and oligarchs around the planet. And so, we retreat into ourselves, into isolation. Who can blame us? O'Sullivan's plaintive words are apt, "What are we to do? What are we to do? Alone again, naturally."

In this time and in this place, we sing a different song. We claim that there is nothing natural or inevitable about being alone. Indeed, St. Paul tells the Corinthian church of a different reality: we can be holy, sanctified in the Christ who comes among us. We are "called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Together is the superpower - together, not alone. In this time and this place, our song likewise names the same healing balm:

For everyone born, a place at the table,
for everyone born, clean water and bread.
a shelter, a space, a safe place for growing
for everyone born, a star overhead.

Like that our Epiphany star gazers of old, there is a star overhead and Jesus who comes among us. John the Baptist calls Jesus the Lamb of God - he is the one who knows our suffering, sorrow, our loneliness. He is the one to follow. He is the one who draws us in, gathers the company of God's children around the table. He is the one who bids, "Come and see!"

It is an awkward moment as Jesus' first would-be disciples shift rabbi and follow the one John calls the Lamb of God. Jesus asks, "What are you looking for?" Andrew and Simon reply, "Rabbi, where do you live?" Maybe, they are stalling for time because they don't know what they seek. Perhaps, they ask a deeply theological question, seeking home of the Christ, the dwelling place of the holy. Jesus simply offers, "Come and see." It is an invitation of holy hospitality.

Too often, preachers reduce Jesus' words, "Come and see," to a command for us to go out to fill the church pews, and church rolls. Too often, "Come and see" is made to equal go and get. And while it is always a grace to invite others into this blessed fellowship, we must be cautious not to make Jesus' invitation into a self-serving church growth mantra. Simply putting people in the same room does not make us less alone. It does not bring us to a place we know as home. Indeed, we can feel even more alone, just as alien.

Yet, St. Hilda's has done much to be a place of hospitality. No doubt, we assuage the loneliness of many. Here a company of strangers are welcomed. I can't keep track the number of AA, Alanon groups that meet here. We give generously in our community. Our contributions at Christmas to the hamper ministry is laudable. In the past, we have opened our annex building as a homeless shelter. And as we improving the green benefits to our HVAC system, we are contemplating the possibility of our church being a warming/cooling center in times of need for those in distress. We strive to make our home a place of holy hospitality.

Come and see is the radical invitation. With Jesus, we are always to seek out who else may be alone and those seeking a home. Come and see: there is "a place at this table" for those who feel the despair, for the broken, the hopeless, for the sick, for the dying, for the scared. At this table, we find the cure for the loneliest of hearts. Jesus extends holy hospitality to all of us - full stop. No one need be alone!

How do we live ever more into this radical, welcome? How do we assuage the deep loneliness of those who we invite to our table? How do we tend our own lonely hearts?

The small Tennessee village where I went to secondary school prided itself on its hospitality. The only lunch place was the Welcome Corner, but the real icon of our hospitality was how we lived with a couple of dozen WWII veterans, were living out their last years in a home care facility in town. They were shell shocked; suffering PTSD as we now say. All had been "treated" by frontal lobotomy. They were shells of men. But in this little town we treated them with the deepest of dignity. When Leroy would come into Miss Jean's Market and shout at the top of his lungs, "Has anyone seen my sanity," no one laughed. Rather someone would

likely help him to sit down on the bench by the potbelly stove - maybe buy him a cup of coffee. Everyone in Bell Buckle knew that our town was a place of hospitality where even LeRoy had a place at the table. But we denied our own dark side, that up the hill there was no running water at Mary Kate's ramshackle home. Grown men were called boy, but we were addressed as "Sir." We just took it as the way of the world that some served at a table but had no place at the table. In our town, table reservations depended on race. Hospitality? No, false pride.

What might be our blind spots? Where do we have ancestral prejudices, fears, and predispositions keep us from saying come and see to those who we do not know? Where do we choose to live in loneliness? Where do we perpetuate the loneliness of others and our own loneliness?

What do we do
What do we do

Alone again, naturally....no, that is not our destiny.

Dear Ones, the good news is that Jesus breaks open everything. We do not have to be lonely, and we can be a healing balm for a world of loneliness - if we will only look at those whom we encounter as Christ himself. What would our community be like if we treated every person who came in this place as we would treat Jesus...those whom we are glad to see and those whom we wish would go away...those who irritate us and those who delight us? And how might our hearts change?

We come and we see. We come home to an open table where there is a place for us and for everyone—no exceptions. Christ opens his heart, his home to us. Let us set the table: the guests are arriving. It is going to be a grand gathering. Come and see! For everyone born, a place at the table....naturally.

- (1) "Alone Again (Naturally)," Gilbert O'Sullivan, 1971.
<https://open.spotify.com/track/1BCaraQHgpBkDniJxt9y93>
- (2) "The Anti-Social Century," Derek Thompson, The Atlantic, February 2025.