



“L is for Lonely”

From the message series *HALT: Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired*

Rev. Ken Beldon

Delivered at WellSprings Congregation, Chester Springs, PA

March 9, 2013

Transcribed

I begin today with a little post-script to last week's message in this series HALT, standing for hungry, angry, lonely, tired. Those are powerful moods, powerful states of being that can be destructive if we don't learn to halt, to pause, while we're in the midst of them.

A little P.S. to “A is for Angry” from last week. I read about this a couple days ago. In the *Harvard Business Review*, author Judith Glazer wrote an article: “Your Brain is Hooked on Being Right.” *[Laughter]* It's about the habitual costs of anger. She's writing about work environments or home environments, places that we may experience habitual anger or distrust or dis-ease.

What happens in those situations, particularly if they're accompanied by a lot of arguing, is that we release a lot of that stress hormone called cortisol that some of you have heard about. And the parts of the brain that we tend to associate with the win-win quality, the strategizing, trust-building, team-building, compassion-building, that gets plowed right over by the older part of our brain, the amygdala, the snake brain, the alligator brain, the brain that says, “I win, you lose! ‘Cause if you win, I lose!” Here's the issue: If we find ourselves arguing on a regular basis, being habitually angry and we win the argument, ooh, the brain loves that dopamine. *[Laughter]*

And the next time we're in another argument, we won't engage the compassion, the trust-building, all that stuff. We'll look for that next hook.

This is the connection I want to talk about today between the A of angry and the L of lonely. because if we live in certain ways, we're not allowing ourselves to engage with our natural, noble, I would say the essence of who we are, desire to really connect. We will find ourselves not just more personally lonely, but not recognizing the loneliness of other people.

I got an example of this a number of years ago. I mean, this must've been 18, 19 years ago. I was a younger person. And it was before I was ordained. I'm not that young, folks. *[Laughter]* I was involved in a congregation and there was a guy in the congregation who was known as kind of a heavyweight, kind of a guy who got things done, got stuff done, and also was known as a person who had a little bit of a temper, was known to argue with other people and often to get his way, and often getting some

really good things done. Well, this was a particular Christmas Eve at this congregation and the preparations were going on for the Christmas Eve service and I ran into this guy in the hallway and he looked different.

His chest wasn't as puffed out as he normally was. He looked a little bit more shrunken, a little bit more quiet. I asked him if he wanted to talk and he kind of went over to the side together. And he didn't say much really to me. He just looked really forlorn.

And he paused a lot. And he kept returning to this phrase, "I don't like my life. I don't like my life. I don't like my life." Now, me, immediately thought Charles Dickens, Christmas Eve, *A Christmas Carol*. [Laughter] This is Scrooge right here, right? A lonely bully with an opportunity for redemption and a new perspective on their life.

Well, sadly, *Christmas Carol* didn't play out at all. Next time I saw this guy at the congregation, he was right back to the same old behaviors. But this one of the things I've recognized over the years. Although I try to have as much compassion as I can possibly generate, possibly be as present to people who have been bullied as much as I can, it's really tough for me to generate compassion and sympathy for people who are bullies.

The two groups often have one thing in common. They know about the reality of human loneliness. When we talk about loneliness, we're talking about the emotional effects of being isolated, of not having your life seen or value or acknowledged and perhaps even at the very deepest, saddest, most fearful base of it, feeling that maybe because you are not acknowledged, you are not loved. This is a core human need for true connection, to not be lonely. What starvation is to the body is what loneliness is to the heart.

Now, there's a lot of discussion going on, especially in the last 15 or 20 years since the rise of all this wonderful gadgetry and technology, that maybe we're a much more lonely society than we ever have been. Probably the most popular sociology book ever published was a book called *Bowling Alone*, which talked about the breakdown in social connections in American society in the age of technology. And there's been a whole bunch of other studies about this.

Except recently, in about the last six months, I read an article in *Slate Magazine* online that actually said, "Well, no. [Laughter] We're not any lonelier than we ever have been. *Bowling Alone* is actually wrong in its analysis." But here's the thing. What both those who say we're just as lonely as we ever have been, take that to be good news; take that to be bad news, or folks who say we're lonelier now than we ever have been. What they both agree upon is this, is that the emotion, spiritual, psychological effects of loneliness are devastating for us; unhealthy and harmful to us.

I mean, there have been study after study done about people who as they age might live on their own and live in conditions of disconnection and isolation and loneliness, that they get sick much more often and experience earlier death than people who are

connected to other people as they age. This is one of our core affirmations, our core beliefs at WellSprings, that we – each of us – has a thirst for fulfillment, a desire to truly fill those God-shaped holes with an honest growing spiritual life, and yet, as we name, unhealthy relationships, materialism, and substance abuse lead to despair and loneliness.

Why these three particular things? Well, I've tried them all out at times in my life when I have been lonely 'cause they're all always an escape from my loneliness. But they don't really do the job. No 47-inch high-definition television will ever make me as happy as I think it could. So I have to recognize that when I'm eying the 60-inch. *[Laughter]* No unhealthy relationship, no quick-fix relationship will ever, or has ever, filled my soul. And certainly, no abuse of any substance has ever done anything for me except make me lonelier.

That is why it is so important to halt when we are lonely, to first recognize simply the fact that we are lonely and not blow right past it in a rush, in a hurry to move past the loneliness as quickly as we can without first recognizing hey, there's a deep core need in each of us that needs real authentic relationship. Because the truth is, sometimes loneliness is even a beneficial state. I think that's the biggest fear about loneliness is that it's permanent.

Sometimes we can recognize that we're just lonely for a time, as my father said to me coming back from one of my vacations in my first year in the bad old days of my all-boys boarding school, The Hill School. I was completely miserable and just crying my heart out and playing my little pity-party tiny little violin for myself. My father said to me a truth that I'll always remember. He said, "You're just gonna be lonely for a while. And then you won't be."

It took the pressure off, so I could just accept that I was lonely for that time. Sometimes, with loneliness, especially in this hyper-charged always-connected society, overly-busy, overly-stimulated society, we may mistake boredom for loneliness. Sometimes, we really recognize that we're just bored because we've been going and going and going and going like that Energizer Bunny, except depleting ourselves, not getting charged back up. We think the minute that we're bored that something's wrong with us rather than taking Steve Jobs' opinion of boredom. He said he's a big believer in boredom, 'cause in boredom, we have a chance to be curious.

That's about that thing: doing a new thing. If you're bored, great! That's an opportunity, he says, to be curious about our lives and to investigate further because out of curiosity comes everything. That is good.

Sometimes being lonely is the necessary cost of real-life change. Sometimes what we belong to or who we belong to is in fact unhealthy and harmful to us and other people. I heard a story not too long ago of a guy name Arno Michaels. He is a reformed neo-Nazi, a man who when he was young was hatefully and violently homophobic and

racist, who took all the pain of growing up in an alcoholic and abusive household and externalized all that anger onto other people until he woke up one day, a simple thing.

He was covered with swastika tattoos. He had one on his hand. And an older African-American woman who took his order one day at a fast-food restaurant, instead of reacting with fear or revulsion, which would've been completely appropriate, looked at his hand and said, "You're better than that." That was an experience for him of positive shaming, of recognizing that if he was truly going to separate himself out from where he had found belonging unhealthfully, it would mean that he was gonna be lonely for a while.

And sometimes, loneliness is exactly what we need if we wish to grow. I think of one of the images from our core beliefs here at Wellsprings, the caterpillar, now actually the happy stuff is about to happen. This is almost a butterfly right here. But imagine the caterpillar going into the chrysalis as we affirm that each of us has capacity for new life. Well you know what? Most of us know it already; that process of transformation is not easy and sometimes it involves loneliness.

But if we understand that, we can have the capacity to halt and to honor the need for time and to honor the need for space, to truly change, then our loneliness, our being set apart for the time, our time in the chrysalis will truly be productive and we won't be judging ourselves in that moment for not being as happy as we think we ought to be. The first step in making our loneliness productive is to simply recognize that we're lonely. How often we can simply kind of blow past our loneliness and not recognize how powerful we wish to connect and how wisely we can connect.

I remember when I was 14 and got a copy of *Tommy* by The Who. That spawned I think one of the worst things in rock-and-roll, the rock opera. Ugh. [Laughter] Horribly pretentious. Awful. Rock should not have operas. That said, this is an awesome album. [Laughter] It's the story of a young boy – many of you know this story – who because of an act of trauma and act of violence that he witnesses completely shuts himself down and off from the rest of the world and that beautiful planted refrain that is woven throughout the entire album, "See me, feel me, touch me, heal me. See me, feel me, touch me, heal me."

This is to recognize where the seeds of loneliness are met by the fruit of kindness in our ability to really perceive another person's being and another person's life. This is what happens sometimes when those of us who wouldn't describe ourselves as lonely or just so freakin' busy, we can blow right past someone else's loneliness almost as if we do not see them.

My most beloved story about the power of loneliness healed and a power of kindness to connect, it's a story I've told before. It's a story I'll continue to tell once every 18 to, let's say, 24 months. You know, you're gonna go to a Bruce Springsteen concert, and I'm not Bruce Springsteen (although I really wish I was), you're gonna hear *Born to Run*. You're gonna keep showing up at Wellsprings? You're gonna hear me tell this story

every 18 to 24 months 'cause it's just that good of a story. And the story is associated with Fred Craddock.

Fred Craddock for decades was America's preeminent teacher of preachers. Fred Craddock tells the story about taking a vacation through the South one summertime and stopping with his wife at a small town in Tennessee at a little café that I can never remember the name of, so I'm just gonna call it the Pig and Whistle or something southern like that. It sounds, to a Northerner like me, southern. I could be completely off-base.

They stop for this little place for dinner and they start to eat their meal and they see this man going from table to table, this silver-haired, grey-haired fox who's going from patron to patron and glad-handing and starting conversations, and the Craddocks kind of think, "No, no. Don't come here." *[Laughter]* "Don't come here. Just let us eat our meal in peace."

And eventually, he gets there. And they start to engage in small talk and they start to hopefully kind of gently with very curt short answers push him away and move him on, and he's not moving on. And so Fred Craddock thinks, I'm gonna throw down a fifty-cent word that'll get him moving on.

When this man asks Fred Craddock what he does for a living, he says, "I teach homiletics." Oh, that's gonna be the end of the conversation right there 'cause who knows what homiletics are! And the guy says, "Oh, you teach preachers how to preach? Well, I got a preacher story for you." *[Laughter]*

And uninvited, he pulls up a chair and sits right down at their table. He says, as the Craddocks groan inwardly, "I was born not far from here on the other side of these mountains." And he said, "It's never easy in any age and for anyone when a child feels abandoned by a parent, but especially where I grew up in that place and that time, it was incredibly difficult for me in this small town 'cause everyone I felt was always asking this question of me. Sometimes they came outright and said it; 'Who's your father? Who's your daddy?' I was known in this small town and was bullied in this small town because I went by one name which wasn't my name, and it was bastard.'

"My mom would send me on errands into the center of town on Saturdays. I could feel everyone's eyes boring in on me, asking that question, even if they weren't saying it aloud" 'Whose boy are you?'

"There was one place," the old man continued, "where I actually felt good about myself. There was a young minister, young preacher, who came to town. When I would go to see and hear him preach, he actually would make me feel better about myself.

"I wouldn't loathe myself for that time. Except... Because I knew I didn't want to be the bastard in church either, I would go in late and I would leave early so that no one could pin me down and call me names. Until this one day I didn't have my wits about me and

I got stuck in that line leaving the congregation. And so I tried to make a mad dash for the exit around the side and I almost was to the door and I felt this hand clamp down on my shoulder.

“And I turned around and it was the minister of this church who put both his hands on my shoulder and said, ‘Whose boy are you?’ sternly searching, ‘Whose boy are you?’” And the old man said, “Inwardly, I just felt like dying. This was gonna be another place, another place that wasn’t safe for me, another place where I was the bastard.

“And then the minister, the preacher, took his hands off my shoulders and stood back a little bit and smiled. He said, ‘Ah, I see it now. I see it now. I see the family resemblance. You’re a child of God. Now go and claim your inheritance.’”

And the old man at the table grew quiet. He said, “Those were the most important words that anyone ever said to me. ‘You’re a child of God, now go and claim your inheritance.’ Thank you for listening to my story.” And the old man got up, and by this point, the Craddocks knew they were in the midst of just a gold story. And Fred Craddock stuttered out, “I’m sorry. We didn’t get your name.”

And the old man, as he was leaving the table, said, “My name is Ben Hooper.” And Fred Craddock then related to his wife that his father had told him the story: that the people of Tennessee had twice elected a man who never knew his father named Ben Hooper to be their governor.

This was a beautiful old story about the power of belonging, about loneliness healed. And just like when we light that chalice, it’s not about what’s passed. It’s about what’s present.

And so I think now about the children of the families, the kids who are likely to be put out, put down, put off, bullied. The child whose expression of their gender doesn’t quite match up with what’s “normal” expectations are, the child who stutters, the child who is not neurotypical, the child who for whatever reason is the one who is singled out and whose being and whose need to connect is diminished.

This is why I love the Fred Craddock story. ‘Cause you know what that minister did? He halted. He allowed himself to see that child’s pain and to remember who that child really was. This is the power of kindness. It reminds me of what I believe are the two most powerful words that I know from any spiritual tradition.

ॐ
मेत्ता

First on top is a word I grew up with but didn’t really know much about. It’s a Hebrew word, **chesed**. It means divine loving-kindness. The word underneath it is Pali, words of the ancient Buddhist scriptures. It is **metta**, also loving-kindness.

Now, one of these traditions is associated with a God who sometimes appears as a person, and one of these words of loving-kindness is associated for a tradition that really doesn't have any teachings about a personal understanding of God. To me, it doesn't matter. One of our core beliefs here at WellSprings is that we can experience God without being able to define God. What is most important is that we allow ourselves the opportunity to recognize how powerful our loving-kindness can be, how an interaction we can have with other people can be words that can fill up an arid and dry soul.

And what it means is that we can recognize that sometimes we have that ability to hide ourselves, to put up that false face and say, "Everything is good and my life is going exactly as I might wish it." When in fact, we are dying and tired inside because we won't halt long enough to allow another person to see the reality of who we are and where we are and how we are.

Kindness only thrives and loving-kindness can only exist when we get beyond the idea that our idea of another person is actually who they are. Ron, I think you're a great guy, but my idea of you is not you. Lloyd, my idea of you is not you. Teresa, you and I are married. My idea of you is not you. *[Laughter]* To enter that space beyond our ideas of what another person's reality is is to halt, to make a commitment that I think we can only affirm meaningfully time after time after time in our lives.

I know we're all so busy. I know not every interaction can be one of revelation. But that's why it's so important to halt, because the impending drive and get-go and doing and going and doing and going and doing and going and doing will just drive us to the point of distraction, which is missing sometimes the people whose lives we need to see, because they need us to see them because they are lonely and hurting.

And sometimes, that is exactly us, to get beyond the idea of who the other person is, to get beyond the idea of the labels that we give to ourselves is to allow the transforming power of loving kindness, which is who we actually I think really are to make the difference for us that it can. Today, maybe that's the new thing. When you notice that you're just kind of moving on and moving on and moving on and not noticing and you stop for a moment and don't see another person to shorthand. They don't see your life in shorthand and you can inquire, "How's it really going?" And to be prepared for whatever answer they will give so that you are there and not somewhere else.

May we allow the power of loving-kindness to truly transform us and to be a balm for the curse of human loneliness. Amen and may you live in blessing.

Let's pray together:

Oh divine source of connection, may we recognize actions that hurt and those that help. May we recognize actions that harm and those that heal. May we recognize that at our base we are truly each of us connected to one another and to the very source and

center of life itself, that each of us carries around the source and center of life itself within us. May we recognize that divine like, that divine spark within each of us and pause long enough to truly be grateful for one another, not just passed onto the next thing and the next thing and the next thing, but to know that we are born to connect.

May it be so and amen.