

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Feast of St. Andrew (transferred)
Sunday November 25, 2018
Preacher: Christopher McLaren
Text: Matthew 4: 18 -22
Title: Lover of Souls

This past week, I read this troubling line in a New York Times article.

America is suffering an epidemic of loneliness.

According to a recent large-scale survey from the health care provider Cigna, most Americans suffer from strong feelings of loneliness and a lack of significance in their relationships. Nearly half say they sometimes or always feel alone or “left out.” Thirteen percent of Americans say that *zero* people know them well. The survey, which charts social isolation using a common measure known as the U.C.L.A. Loneliness Scale, shows that loneliness is worse in each successive generation.

The article cited loneliness as the problem at the center of a new book, [Them: Why We Hate Each Other — and How to Heal](#), by Senator Ben Sasse, Republican of Nebraska. Mr. Sasse argues that “loneliness is killing us,” citing, among other things, the skyrocketing rates of suicide and overdose deaths in America. This year, 45,000 Americans will take their lives, and more than 70,000 will die from drug overdoses.

The article and the book have a lot more to say about the epidemic of loneliness stalking America. It talks about the ever changing and unstable work environment for many, the isolation brought about by electronic entertainment, the isolating of people into discreet like-minded individuals, and more.

Mr. Sasse worries even more, however, about a pervasive feeling of homelessness: Too many Americans don't have a place they think of as home — a “thick” community in which people know and look out for one another and invest in relationships that are not transient.

It is not just an American problem however. You may have noticed an article several years ago about The Ministry of Health in England identifying loneliness as the number one health problem in the UK. British research found that more than nine million people in the country often or always feel lonely, according to a 2017 report published by the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness.

In fact, earlier this year Teresa May took the unusual step of appointing a ministry for loneliness.

Mark Robinson, the chief officer of Age UK, Britain's largest charity working with older people, warned that the problem could kill.

"It's proven to be worse for health than smoking 15 cigarettes a day, but it can be overcome and needn't be a factor in older people's lives," he said.

Quoting from the Cox Commission's report on loneliness, lawmakers said in a joint statement, "Young or old, loneliness doesn't discriminate."

I want to hold this revelation about an epidemic of loneliness in our hearts and minds as we explore the life of St. Andrew and what made him a notable disciple of Jesus.

In the Gospel stories, Andrew lives in the shadow of his older brother, Simon Peter. But in Mark's gospel account it was Andrew who after meeting Jesus, immediately goes to find his brother Simon dragging him through the streets to the house where Jesus was staying, declaring that he and his friends have found the Messiah. He has sensed the Spirit at work and his soul is ready to follow. Jesus' call of "Come and See" has unleashed a deep desire of his heart and he is eager to share that with others.

So, Andrew was the one who brought Peter to Jesus, a fortunate introduction, to say the least. As Peter grew in prominence even as his younger brother Andrew nearly fades into the background of the Christian story.

What else do we know about Andrew? There are two more important stories about Andrew. First some strangers come to two of the disciples requesting that they be allowed to see Jesus. It was Andrew, we are told, who took their request and probably took the men to see Jesus, as well. It's a quiet act of introduction and mediation but in truth it sets the stage for Jesus' ministry which will move beyond the confines of Jesus' own native Judaism to become an expansive, embracing and inclusive mission. Andrew is the model of bringing people to Jesus. Andrew is a builder of connection and relationship.

Later, there is one more small detail about the life of Andrew. Although it is overshadowed by the miracle at the center of the story, it was Andrew who found a small boy among thousands of people and brought the boy with his loaves and

fishes to Jesus was Andrew. Andrew has a knack for bring people to Jesus, to helping find an opening in their soul. Andrew seems always to be bringing friends, relatives, and strangers to Jesus.

As Christians we know the importance of having Christ in our lives, and sometimes we are a bit shy about the other side of this relationship, that of bringing others to Christ, of opening ways to connection with God. I realize that sounds a lot like evangelism and I can see some Episcopalians sidling toward the back doors even now. I wonder if on this ancient feast we might dare to bring out an old phrase that has fallen into disuse these days, “lover of souls.” Andrew was a “lover of souls.” He was interested in people making a connection with God. Soul, soul is the sound we make when we speak in faith about a human being’s capacity for intimacy with God.

The word “soul” names our intrinsic human capacity to be indwelt by the divine presence. To say “soul” is to say that you believe that the capacity for God is not a mysterious privilege reserved for mystics and saints, but something that belongs to created human nature, something every human being has and is as it comes forth from the womb.

That we are “soulful” people we know only by faith. Persons and characters and relationships are right before our eyes and we know that we are to value and nurture them. There is in our culture an endless stream of evidence for the psyche, the natural inner human life. But the soul of a person is accessible only by faith. Here in this place, among this people of God we are engaged in a rare activity, we are part of a sustained act of faith in soul, our Christian spirituality holds that every human being has the intrinsic capacity to be filled with the fullness of God. As a community we remind one another of this each week even when we are tempted to forget it or deny it.

Today we will celebrate the baptism of two young children KC and Nathaniel. I’ll have the privilege of holding these beautiful human beings in my arms. And in the midst of it there is this realization that they are not just cute little creatures, but rather deep mysteries in themselves, capable of being indwelt by the very power of God’s Spirit.

Each week as I stand holding the body and blood of Christ in my hands, I realize that it is a moment of loving souls, of offering from God’s abundance the presence of Christ into each of our lives, into the need, into the loneliness, into the desire, into the openness of each woman and man, and child and youth who reaches out hands to receive the gift of connection with God. In the midst of our busy and distracted

lives, in the midst of our doubts and troubles, in the midst of our delight and laughter, in the midst of our fears and longing we are reminded of our souls, of our capacity to be joined to God. Each week this love of souls happens in our midst.

Andrew becomes a disciple of Jesus because he is caught in the net of the Lover of Souls. He is caught because Jesus invites him into a new way of thinking, of acting, a new way of consciousness, or to use the biblical term repentance. Jesus is fascinating to Andrew and so he follows. Jesus draws him into discipleship by calling him into consciousness of a deeper dimension to life, the spiritual sea in which all people swim. Andrew is caught by Jesus because he speaks to this deeper part of his life, his soul, his heart's desire, hidden deep within. He follows because he senses the lover of souls in his midst. He has been caught by Jesus, not like a fish is pulled from the water against its will, but rather by the deep fascination he discovers in his heart.

The theologian John Shea writes, "We follow fascination, especially fascination that has our "name" on it. When we see someone thinking, feeling or acting in a way which, at the present moment, we are not capable of but which we wish to we were capable of, that way of thinking, feeling or acting has our "name" on it. We see it as a liberating next step for ourselves and we apprentice ourselves to it. It draws us into discipleship. A disciple is merely a fascinated person who desires to know and do what they see in another (Shea, *On Earth as in Heaven*).

The fascination of Andrew with Jesus leads him in an interesting direction, he become a person in the gospels who we see over and over again bringing people to Jesus. He is not only fascinated with Jesus, but wants others to have the opportunity to experience him for themselves. Some have called Andrew the go-between. For Andrew is always bringing others to Jesus, his brother, Greeks, and the boy with the lunch so that they too might have a new adventuresome possibility of following Jesus.

This is the beauty and manner of Andrew the go-between guy. In bringing others to Christ, he paid them the highest honor and bestowed upon them the greatest dignity. Can there be a greater compliment, any greater measure of value, than to be reckoned a fit gift for God? What more loving act, more endearing gesture can one offer on behalf of another that to say, "You are worthy of presentation to God?"

Andrew was a lover of souls, he delighted in offering to people to Christ, that they too might become fascinated with his life and way. That in doing so they might find

their lives changed, connected to spiritual energy, affirmed at the deep level of heart that they are loved and forgiven and desired by God.

There is no better way to help our world overcome some of the loneliness that exists, than to become like Andrew, a lover of souls. To work at introducing people to Jesus, the lover of souls. There is no greater gift than introducing others to God. St. Gregory of Nyssa put it this way, "The one thing truly worthwhile is becoming God's friend. The one way all of us overcome our loneliness is to find our connection to God. And what a gift it is to be part of a community that is dedicated to helping one another grow and deepen in that friendship with God. Andrew created connections so that people could find Jesus. He made it possible for people to fall in love with God. That is our mission as well, to find ourselves fascinated by Jesus, take the risk to follow him on the way, and dare to invite others into the life-changing relationship of knowing Christ. **Our task, if we choose to accept it, is to become the kinds of neighbors and generous friends that we wish we had.** This is what creates a thick community in which it is very easy to fall in love with God, which is a beautiful way to overcome the loneliness that we all know and experience more than we want to admit or speak about. A loneliness that only the Lover of Souls can heal and all the more likely if there are people in our lives willing to help bring us to Jesus.

Article

How Loneliness Is Tearing America Apart
By William Brooks Nov. 23, 2018 New York Times.

Article

U.K. Appoints a Minister for Loneliness.
By Ceylan Yeginsu New York Times Jan. 17, 2018

An Old Gaelic Blessing:

*May the road rise up to meet you.
May the wind always be at your back.
May the sun shine warm upon your face,
And rains fall soft upon your fields.
And until we meet again,
May God hold you in the palm of his hand.*