

PART II: Loving (Identity Revelation)

*You can survive on your own;
you can grow strong on your own;
you can prevail on your own;
but you cannot become human on your own.*

FREDERICK BUECHNER

Week 18: A Kid Named Lonely

I want to tell you about a kid named Lonely.

The kid is genderless and ageless and *all-of-us*. He's the little boy curled up in his dark bedroom, listening to the yelling in the kitchen below. She's the little girl growing up in a house with vacant eyes and big-distracted people. Lonely is the kid on the playground, staring at the impenetrable huddles of his peers. Lonely is the boy waiting in the drizzle for the ride that isn't coming. Lonely is the girl whose boyfriend sees her body but not her heart. Lonely is three touchdowns on Friday night and no one sober enough to share it with. He's the growing man in a freshman dorm, surrounded by noise and scared to death. She's the first day of a new job and a bustling cafeteria but a table of one. Lonely is the earnest effort to reveal your heart to the people around you, and confusion on the faces of the people you love and want to be loved *by*.

As long as you are human and breathing, there is a lonely kid with big eyes and a trembling heart somewhere inside of you.

Loneliness *hurts*. Like a badly sprained ankle. We may not be aware of it until we stand on it—until we try to love and live—and then the pain shoots through us. A few torn ligaments in your ankle and there's no way around it: you will need crutches. Our loneliness works the same way. But our loneliness-crutches aren't made of wood. They're made of other things.

We think we can fill up the lonely places inside of us with a crowd. We seek popularity and numbers. We join the basketball team or the cheerleading squad. We collect a billion friends on Facebook. But we ultimately discover the lonely space is bottomless, and no crowd is big enough to fill it.

We think we can erase the loneliness problem with sex. At the moment of orgasm, most people will describe a sense of oneness with their sexual partner, *even if they don't know their name*. The distinction between self and other is erased and our loneliness is obliterated. For a moment. But by the time we wake up, our psychic walls have returned and we are lonely again. So, we become addicted to the sexual experience.

We think we can conquer our loneliness with achievement. As lonely little boys and girls, we look around and the winners seem to be saturated with attention and adoration. So, we find something to conquer. We seek fame and wealth and accolades. Yet, when the admiration rolls in, the loneliness seems bigger than ever. We end up with big jobs and big houses and an even bigger hole gaping in our hearts.

We do our best to solve our loneliness problem, but our best efforts leave us even more alone than before. So, what do we do next? We marry one person! We

concentrate our efforts. We expect one person to take away all of our loneliness. But if the many can't heal our loneliness, how can the one? They can't.

Despite our best efforts, we will come to discover that, in this life, our loneliness can never be taken away completely. But the hopelessness of this possibility seems too much to endure, so instead we blame. We accuse the people we love of being defective. We get bitter and angry and resentful. And secretly, we believe *we* are the cause of our loneliness—shame tells us we're not worthy of connection and belonging. So we pretend we're somebody else in the hope that that somebody-else will finally earn us the kind of connection we've been craving.

In the process, we make our loneliness complete.

Here's the fundamental flaw with that way of trying to heal our loneliness: places of belonging are not meant to be places where our loneliness is taken *away*. They are meant to be places where we *reveal* our loneliness to one another. They are not places in which we eradicate our loneliness; they are places in which we make it available to someone else. A sense of belonging happens when we feel a little less alone in the world because we discover we're not the only one feeling alone in the crowd. With belonging, we don't become free *from* loneliness, we become free *for* loneliness. And the healing is in this: once you have made your loneliness available to one of your people—a friend, a lover, a spouse—you will no longer need to eradicate it. You will be able to touch it without fear and despair. You may feel hopeless to *fix it*, but you will be filled with the hope that comes from *being joined in it*.

This is the love that results from truly revealing who we are.

Several years ago, as I was walking out of a restaurant with a friend, he turned to me and said, "It was good to talk to you tonight. I feel a little less alone in the world because of it." *A little less alone*. It felt just right. No burden to take away all of each other's loneliness. An acknowledgement that companionship can happen in the midst of a mutual loneliness. Perhaps even *because* of a mutual loneliness.

How often do you expect the ones closest to you to take away *all* of your loneliness? And when they don't, in what ways do you blame, criticize, resent, or distance yourself from them? Our relationships are not intended to erase our loneliness.

They are intended to be a place where our loneliness is *shared*.