

Good morning! If you are new or visiting with us, or if this is your first time here, welcome.

We are really glad you are here.

If you are a regular attendee and you came to church for most of the summer, then welcome to you, we are glad you chose to come this morning as well.

And if you are a regular attendee but you took the summer off, so to speak, and took time to do your own thing on Sunday mornings, then welcome back!

We are glad you have returned to the fold.

I am glad that each of you is here today.

I am glad that you are here, in part, because we have something to talk about and I think it's important that as many people be a part of the conversation as possible.

Actually, we have two problems.

I am sure that each of you has personally experienced these problems, either in yourself or someone you love.

They are affecting our society, our children, our homes, our workplaces and how we engage on social media.

They've actually become somewhat of an epidemic among certain segments of society.

These two problems are depression and anxiety.

The World Health Organization recently said that, *“Depression is now the leading cause of ill health and disability worldwide... with more than 300 million people suffering.”* (*Let's Talk!*, WHO says, as depression rates rise 18 percent in a decade,” www.reuters.com, March 30, 2017).

300 million people is like if every single person in the United States suffered from depression.

That’s a lot of people.

In 10 years, depression rates have risen eighteen percent!

Pediatricians have seen a rapid increase in depression among teenage girls.

One study showed that 20%, that is 1 in 5 girls, reported having at least one major depressive episode in the past year.

That’s not just general teen angst and moodiness, major depressive episodes are defined as a period of at least two weeks of a chronic low mood with symptoms such as loss of interest in normally enjoyable activities, and problems with sleep, energy and concentration. (*There's a Startling Increase in Major Depression Among Teens in the U.S.*,” www.Time.com, Nov. 15, 2016.)

And it’s not just youth, I am finding that more and more people I know suffer from depression, but what’s even more prevalent is anxiety.

I don’t mean to be flippant but it feels like everyone has anxiety.

I have begun to wonder if there are anxiety support groups because I know a lot of people who could benefit from such a thing.

In my pastoral care meetings with people, folks regularly disclose that they have anxiety, to which my response is, “Yes, I do too.”

I do.

I have terrible bouts of anxiety, and it’s great that we can commiserate together and that I can relate to their struggle in such a personal way.

But it makes me wonder what the heck is going on with our culture, our country and our society?

What is causing the pervasive epidemics?

Well, I could very well be wrong, and this information is not based on any empirical studies, but I have two theories.

I think depression and anxiety (and, I’ll include, crippling loneliness), are on the rise because of the use of technology and less people being part of organized religion.

Let’s start with technology.

Because of the tiny computers that we carry around in our pockets, we are more interconnected, more plugged in and also more isolated than ever before.

Sherry Turkle is a researcher who did a TedTalk called, *“Connected, but alone?”*

In this talk, she argues that technology has removed our ability to be alone and to be self-reflective.

She says, *“Solitude is where you find yourself so that you can reach out to other people and form real attachments.”*

Technology has removed our opportunities for self-reflection.

She says that people tell her about, *“the important new skill of making eye contact while you're texting... Why does this matter? It matters... because... we're setting ourselves up for trouble –*

trouble certainly in how we relate to each other, but also trouble in how we relate to ourselves and our capacity for self-reflection.

We're getting used to a new way of being alone together.

People want to be with each other, but also elsewhere -- connected to all the different places they want to be.

People want to customize their lives... Some people think that's a good thing.

But you can end up hiding from each other, even as we're all constantly connected to each other...

Connecting in sips may work for gathering discrete bits of information, but they don't really work for learning about each other, for really coming to know and understand each other.

And we use conversations with each other to learn how to have conversations with ourselves.

So a flight from conversation can really matter because it can compromise our capacity for self-reflection.

That feeling that no one is listening to me is very important in our relationships with technology.

That's why it's so appealing to have a Facebook page or a Twitter feed -- so many automatic listeners.

And the feeling that no one is listening to me makes us want to spend time with machines that seem to care about us....

You end up isolated if you don't cultivate the capacity for solitude, the ability to be separate, to gather yourself."

If we don't take time away from our screens, we lose sight of who we are, what matters most to us, how we want to really spend our time and attention.

We stop making decisions and just become these automatons that are glued to our screens, consciously or unconsciously comparing ourselves to others, lacking in real connection, but unaware that we are disconnected because we feel so connected.

We might even use technology as an opiate so that we don't have to sit with ourselves and do any kind of self-reflection, because if we do that, we might experience bouts of depression or anxiety because we have lost sight of who we are and whose we are.

We pour ourselves into the very gadgets, which are facilitating our mental unwellness, so that we don't have to face the fact that we are mentally unwell.

It's a vicious cycle.

That brings me to the second thing that I think is a contributory factor of the rise in depression and anxiety and crippling loneliness, that is that less and less people are part of organized religion.

Here's the thing about being part of a faith community, first of all, it forces you to unplug for at least one hour.

I know that some churches encourage their parishioners to live-Tweet the sermon or to check in on Facebook while they are sitting in the pews, but I will never ask you to do any such during worship.

In fact, I am grateful that we don't have screens in the sanctuary simply because we are looking at them so much during the rest of our waking hours.

But going to a service forces you to put your phone away, to leave social media and Twitter and Instagram and LinkedIn and email and texting, leave it all behind for at least one hour.

The world will keep turning without you being plugged in.

Also.

I know that some of you do use your phones during worship, I'd encourage you to try to leave it in your purse or pocket or better yet, in your car, during the time you're here, simply because it's good for you.

Immersing yourself in worship is good for you because it gives you a chance to self-reflect in ways that many of us aren't doing anymore.

Worship forces you to sit with your own thoughts, worries, desires, wishes, hopes and dreams without being influenced by what's on your screen.

It helps you re-center, focus on what you want to do this next week, how you want to spend your time, what matters to you.

Being together in worship also reminds you, I hope, that you are beloved, that you are enough, just as you are.

The vast majority of messages we receive on the internet are about how we aren't good enough, aren't doing enough, aren't as successful as our Facebook friend, and how we need to somehow be improved upon.

I pray that this hour of being unplugged will remind you that you don't need to be improved.

You are beloved and wanted and needed here in this community, just as you are.

I also hope that being here will remind you that you are not alone.

That someone is struggling with the same thing you are, that someone is angry at the world for the same reason you are, that someone is celebrating a similar joy.

In fact, when I opened my email this morning, I had several messages from people telling me they were thinking about and praying for my family down in Florida.

I wouldn't have had that love and support if I wasn't part of a church family.

I could go on and on about all the benefits of being part of a faith community, but the last thing I will say is that I hope being here helps you feel a sense of gratitude.

It's really easy for us to focus on all the deficits in our lives.

But I hope coming to church helps us see the blessings in our lives, that although sometimes we might feel like we are falling apart, we still have it pretty good and still have lots of reasons to be thankful.

In fact, someone told me that her therapist recommended she start a gratitude journal, as one way to combat her anxiety.

You could think of church as a weekly entry in your embodied gratitude journal.

Folks, we are tribal beings.

We have lived in community since the first generation of Homo sapiens.

We were not meant to do this life alone.

Jesus knew this.

The disciples knew this.

He sent them out to evangelize in two's.

In the story that we heard from Acts this morning, which is about the disciples figuring out how to be Christians after Jesus' crucifixion, the text tells us that,

"All who believed were together and had all things in common...

Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people." (Acts 2: 44, 46-47)

Friends, on this Welcome Back Sunday, let us remember that we need each other.

We need to be in relationship with one another, to be reminded that we are enough, that we are worthy, and other people have our backs, and that we aren't supposed to do this life alone.

If you suffer from depression or anxiety or loneliness, I highly doubt that going to church will rid you of all your symptoms, but it I hope it helps.

So thank you for being here, for bringing your full selves to this sacred place.

Amen.