

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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Loneliness

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I don't feel lonely like the way many people talk about. I have a lot of friends and have most of my life. Yet, I definitely experienced my own unmistakable layered sense of loneliness. It doesn't seem like I belong with a family that I came from, but I don't feel a part of the people that I'm with now. It's like I'm caught in between two worlds, not belonging to either one. Where do I fit? I don't feel fully understood. My perspective can be appreciated and my perspective can be discarded. I often feel alone in my ideas, in my faith, in my political beliefs. Why can't anyone else get it, see it the way I see it, fight for it the way I'm fighting for it. At times, I feel alone from my spouse and our understanding of each other. In the office there are times I feel judged and isolated. I found DC to be one of the loneliest cities there is, people are committed to causes more than to people. People pursue power more than they pursue relationship. They'll sell you out in a hot minute when you no longer serve a purpose for them. Being away from family can be part of it, but relationships often lack true authenticity. Loneliness is not having people around you. It's having people to whom you are connected or that you can remain committed to even in differences or in challenges. It's finding peace in yourself with another.

Thanks to one of our NCC'ers for sharing some of their journey and walk and unique perspective on loneliness. And I heard that and it felt palpable to me because certainly when I look back on my history, there's moments and there's seasons where I wrestle with a differentiation, with a sense of isolation from and even when I'm investing in deep or intimate places with other people, I can find myself disconnected and kind of holding back in relationship.

Doctor Dillup, just the professor of psychiatric psychiatry and neuroscience at the University of California San Diego did this study with adults between the ages of 27 and 101; I don't know why 101, random. I think he was just trying to use a set of individuals that were a part of normal society and that were within the culture that they were living. And what was surprising about the survey, a 20 point survey on loneliness and what was surprising about it was that 76% of people felt a deep sense of loneliness in their life. And so what's that mean? That means that okay, the person on your left and the person on your right and the person in front of you and the person behind you right now as you're sitting; three of those four people feel a deep sense of loneliness and part of who they are. Loneliness might not mean what we think it means though.

{Inaudible} continues, there's a misperception that loneliness means social isolation. The definition of loneliness is distress because of the discrepancy between actual social relationships and desired social relationships. In other words, you can feel lonely if you're single. You can feel lonely if you're married, you can feel lonely if you're surrounded by kids, you can feel so lonely with people all around you. No matter what our situation or circumstances, you can feel loneliness. Henry David Thoreau said that a city is a place where hundreds of people are lonely together. Isn't our context a city is a place where there's no parking and there's hundreds of thousands of people that are lonely together, right.

At the beginning of the Good Book at the beginning of time, God creates and he says, it is good, remember this? And over and over he creates and he says, (Hey, little buddy, I missed you. Its summertime, isn't it? And high five little bug showing back up.) He creates and he says it's good over and over until Genesis chapter two when he says, it is not good for man to be alone,. And science has been proving God's initial statement that he made at the beginning of time. And a survey of heart attack victims, 50% of victims said that they were either depressed or lonely prior to their heart attack. Study shows that about 80% of people go to psychiatrists for in some capacity reasons of loneliness. Dr. Dean Ornish, the founder of the Preventative Medicine Research Institute, he said this of the effects of loneliness, he says, I'm not aware of any other factor, not diet, not smoking, not exercise, not stress, not genetics, not drugs, not surgery that has a greater impact on our incidents of illness and chance of premature death than loneliness.

Here's the thing, though, God is an inter-connected God who deeply desires connected relationship with and for his creation. He desires this for us. He desires connection for us. God desires that we would not be lonely. Hear what I'm saying and hear what I'm not saying. He doesn't promise that we won't be lonely. He doesn't say he won't use us in our loneliness. He doesn't say he won't teach us in our loneliness. He doesn't say there isn't purpose in our loneliness, but at the core of who God is, he desires deep communion with his creations and he desires communion also with one another, this is who God is

Dr. Gary Collins said that we live in a loneliness producing society. So today I'd like to peel away some of the misconceptions of what loneliness is and maybe we can step and move prayerfully a little towards a place, more towards a place of health and wholeness in Christ. Five misconceptions I want to talk about.

First is this, if I have faith, I won't ever feel lonely, misconception number one. Was Jesus ever lonely? Well, we see in scripture the Prophet Isaiah back in Isaiah 53, I think it's verse five, verse three, excuse me, says he is despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. When Jesus showed up to the creation, when he showed up to his creation, the beings that he had created, here's what he found in John chapter one, verse 11. It says, "*He came unto his own, and his own received him not.*" I can't imagine going on a long trip, coming back home, opening the door, and they're my kids come running towards me, Daddy, Daddy, we don't want you and come up and gut punched me and then slap me on the back, throw the door in my face and shun me and want no part of me. Jesus shows up to his very created beings, he comes to his creation and what happens? He is rejected by men, it says. He comes to his creation and his own; his creation did not receive him as their own.

Go back a couple of verses, John chapter one, verse one it says: "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*" He was with God in the beginning. "*3 Through him, all things were made by him; and without him nothing was made that has been made.*" Jesus was the word. So in the beginning, Jesus was with God and Jesus was God. And so it's this hard to understand concept that we understand is as the trinity, right? Three persons, one being, he's God the father, God the son, Jesus and God the Holy Spirit. And they have this interconnected relationship and they model for us relationship that we desire with our father, and also with those around us. So even in verse 11 when Jesus was rejected by men, he still had the father, right? And in fact, Jesus would retreat often, would get away from people so that he could

commune with the father. So Jesus would get alone so that he didn't have to have loneliness. It's a strange concept; it's counterintuitive, isn't it? So Jesus has this routine but fast forward to the cross, Jesus comes to this moment of the cross and remember they take a crown of thorns and they press it on his head and blood starts to run down. But Jesus doesn't cry, does he? And he's beaten and he's whipped 39 times, almost to the point of death but he doesn't cry. And he's tortured and he's beaten and he's taunted and he's made fun of and he's left by those closest to him but in all of this he doesn't...but it wasn't until the very end where he's on the cross and it says that Jesus cried out unto God, Father, do you remember this? Father why have you forsaken me? This moment of deep pain that finally all the emotions are released and he cries out unto God, why have you left me alone? Why have you forsaken me in this moment? He had never been apart from the father. He was with God remember, from the very beginning of time, he had helped create time and all of his life, all of his existence, who he is at the core of who he is was always to be with God. So it did not only break God's heart to save you. It broke the very existence of who he is. It didn't just break his heart to bring salvation it broke who he was. We have no clue how heaven experienced the cross.

We think of it as deep physical pain in a moment on a hill, but it was so much more than that wasn't it? It was separation of self. It was a separation of a father and a son who are so intertwined and connected. But isn't this the beauty of the cross? Isn't this the beauty of our story of faith? That God broke himself to heal us or as my testimony today, he broke himself, don't tell me that in your brokenness that God can't bring about healing. It's through brokenness of himself that he modeled, that he brought to the table redemption for you and I, we think if we have faith we'll never experience loneliness but Jesus navigated loneliness, didn't he? No, so, maybe we're asking the wrong question. We're asking how do we get rid of loneliness. But maybe the question should be how do we navigate loneliness that comes to us? How do we walk through the pain and still find meaning? How do we get through the hard times and still come through at Jesus stayed on the cross even when he was forsaken, he still stayed. He knew there was still purpose even through the loneliness.

Second Corinthians 4:8 Paul says it, he speaks it, he prophetically calls it out. I am pressed, but not what? But not crushed. I am persecuted, but I am not abandoned. I am struck down, but I am not destroyed. He understands something that even in the loneliness, even in the hurt, even in the pain that God is still at work. Jesus knew he had to walk through a season of loneliness. He walked through a season of pain, of being misunderstood, of people not hearing, of people not knowing people, and people not understanding what he was doing, who he was about where he was truly going. But even in that season, he laid down tracks for the connection to come. He's on the cross and he says, Father, forgive them for they know not what they do. The very people that brought pain and hurt and loneliness into his life he says Father forgive them. Then he turns to the guy on his side and he says, I'll see you in paradise. He's laying the tracks even in a season of loneliness he's laying the tracks for connection that is to come. Faith doesn't promise us perfection, but it will lead you towards connection. God used loneliness. He used loneliness.

If you only have homogenous relationships, maybe you don't have a healthy sense of loneliness in your life, right. Because we're not called just to be in relationships that look exactly like us with people that came from our background or think like we think or look like we look, no, there is a healthy sense of loneliness that we're called to step into. We are kingdom people, right, the

Kingdom of God. We are called in the scriptures; we are citizens of the Kingdom of God. What does that mean? It means that we're not living in our home. We are then called to be ambassadors for Christ, so we live here in a foreign land by nature as an ambassador. You live in a place with people that don't look like you, that didn't have the same experiences that are very different than you by nature. We are called into a sense of loneliness. That's our calling, but we are citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven and we find communion with our King and with our fellow citizens that God has granted us to be with. To step in faith towards someone else in a relationship means there's probably some pain that will come. This is what happens to get to a place of beauty in communion, sometimes you have to move through pain and loneliness.

This story is beautifully told by one of our parents and I want you to check out a video and just hear one example of this. Checkout this story.

{Video by Natalie Perdue an NCC Youth Parent}

So, I was looking at the calendar trying to figure out what to do with my 14 year old son and I admit that's where we started. I wanted him to do the mission camp with NCC because I wanted to fill his calendar with good things. It was not a pretty experience trying to get him on the bus. It was worse than ugly. It was just the fact that he's shy and we were asking him to do what felt impossible and that was to get on a bus with a bunch of strangers. The texts started rolling in from him, he was wanting to come home. It was night one and night two and everything as a mom wanted to go grab him and bring him home to safety. It was something I had to push through as a parent. It wasn't just about him, it was about us also allowing our kid to feel a little bit of pain and a little bit of loneliness, knowing and trusting that God would, you know, meet him in that space.

I just asked if Stephen could be on the lookout for this kid of mine and I don't know what Stephen did other than I know that he prayed and we were praying and the text stopped and the next time we engaged with our son, he was willing to stay. And by the end of the week we had a different child, nothing miraculous, but just a really different child who had an incredible experience. When I think about the value of youth group, my kids, it's not youth group in so much as it is being exposed to people who love God with everything they have and who are committed to a life of service. As a society we are so committed to our kids' sports and to their academics and to, you know their healthy living pattern. And for some reason, even as Christian parents, we managed to put their faith journeys way too often on the back burner. My husband and my heart's desire is to give them enough of a taste of the goodness of God through their teenage years. So that when they leave our nest they long for that and they look for it. We send our kids to youth group, not because we want those youth group leaders to be their only spiritual leaders, but because we just need backup. But what I do see in the NCC leaders is a commitment to the Lord and love of God that is just truly real and it's gorgeous and it's kind of captivating. And for them to sweep in and say to our kids we believe in you and you are the leaders of the future. We need to be reminded of that as parents, that someone has faith that our kids are the leadership of the future.

{End of video}

Amen, so good. And I just got a call out our youth group and our leaders, I want to thank all those who lead in our youth group and you saw at the very end mission camp is coming up. So you need to sign up today. If you're a parent or if you're here and you're in middle school or high school, you need to be a part of this thing. I'm telling you, it's one of the best things you'll do this summer. So I hope you sign up today. Is Pastor Brooke here, are you around? Come on Pastor. Can we give it up for Pastor Brooke today?

And stand up stand up just so people can see you. So, if you're a parent here today, after service, why not, can you just connect with Pastor Brooke? I know she's engaging with our DC campuses. And so I just encourage her, ask questions, comments, the really hard questions too, right? No, I'm sorry. But engage with her today after service. Where are you going to be after service today?

Pastor Brooke: Just out in the lobby.

Pastor Joel: Just out in the lobby So, connect with her, but so grateful for our youth group and what an incredible example, right of pressing in even when it hurts that God's still has pain or excuse me, God still has purpose that will come in or through some of those painful moments that we have in seasons of life.

Misconception number two, loneliness means the absence of people. I think we need to make a distinction between loneliness and solitude. I kind of made the point a few minutes ago, but Jesus retreated didn't me. He retreated to solitude. He got alone so that he didn't have to experience loneliness, so that he could commune with God the Father. And I think for a lot of us though, we feel so lonely and so we do the opposite. We don't get alone, we don't have solitude, in fact, we fill our minds and our ears with as much noise as possible, don't we? And it's music, it's the podcast, it's TV, it's a radio or it's just being around people. We just need the noise to drown out the loneliness that is really in us. This is a misconception; loneliness is not the absence of people. It's the presence of pain. It's dealing with that pain is where we need to go.

Charles Stanley talks about what's behind the pain, what causes the pain? Three things, first, rejection, it's an experience from long ago or recent or you were rejected, you felt strongly reject or you were hurt and somebody said something or they did something or they left you or they hurt you or abused you, and you have that feeling of rejection in your past that then you hold onto and you get into self protective mode. Right? I can't go there again. And so it's affected your now and your future and your relationships because you can't engage in that way or you can't be transparent or you can't put yourself out there or risk in that way because of rejection. Or maybe it's insecurity. We don't accept ourselves or we don't think that others can accept us. And so we put up these walls and we just don't even allow ourselves or others to go there. Or maybe it's grief, we've had a tough loss, lost someone so loved and dear to us and were just in pain and hurt and we're just so lonely because of what we...

This is Job in the scripture as Job chapter 19 verse 13 he says, "*He hath put my brethren far from me, and mine acquaintance are verily estranged from me.*"¹⁴ *My kinsfolk have failed, and my familiar friends have forgotten me.*"¹⁵ *They that dwell in mine house, and my maids, count me for a stranger: I am an alien in their sight.*"¹⁸ *Yea, young children despised me; I arose, and they*

*spake against me.*¹⁹ *All my inward friends abhorred me: and they whom I loved are turned against me.*" Job had lost everything. He had lost all his stuff, his family; he had lost his friends, his friends turned against him. He was trying to pursue and follow God his friends went the opposite directions, they had different values and they separate and in his hardest season he was separated from his friends. And, I think it's chapter 12 or chapter seven. He says, "*I loath my life*". He's just in this brutal place of loneliness. But later he's restored. He finds reconciliation with God and with life and he's restored in Job chapter 42 and here's what the scripture says; how did Job find restoration? It says the Lord restored the fortunes of Job when he prayed for his friends and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before. How was he restored? He was restored because he dealt with this pain, right? How did he deal with it? He prayed for his friends. Isn't that counter intuitive, to pray for those who hurt us, those people who caused the loneliness that we're feeling, but he didn't allow his friends misdeeds against him to hold them captive. The people that cause us pain are the very people that can bring us power, not because of their choices, but because of our choices about them. To choose to forgive is to open up possibilities of restoration in our life, to bring healing. But what do we do by nature? We hold onto those things, don't we? We hold on to bitterness so dearly cause that's all we got. That's what we've learned and so we hold on to deep anger, but what does that become? It becomes a cancer of our soul and a cancer of our emotions. And here's what's terrible. It literally becomes cancer in us. Studies show the correlations between deep isolation and internal anger that we have and cancer producing cells in our body. And so we hold onto these things and it becomes the very thing that that kills us, that takes us down. If that's you today, lay it down; let it go in the name of Jesus. Wow. That's hard, isn't it? Come to the foot of the cross. Come to the Lord who knows you, who sees you, who loves you, who understands you. Don't allow the pains that others have caused in your life to hold back restoration. Come to Christ and then release and let go at the foot of the altar. Allow the Lord to bring healing to your hurts.

Misconception number three, we can deal with loneliness by connecting through technology. And this isn't just a statement that we make, right? Oh yeah, I'll figure it out by connecting through technology. But I think it's something that we believe and we practice in our life, right, by the amount of time that we try and emotionally invest in social media and technology. Decades of research has shown that our greatest need after food and shelter is social connection. And we see that cell phones can, they can be a source of instant connection, can't they? And they can be a source of constant distraction, can't they? And so I have a friend and he's so funny, and because when you're with him, you're never quite with them. You know what I mean? You got one of these friends? And now if you're not with them, it's great because he's always accessible, answers your texts right away, he'll always take your phone call, but when you're with him it drives you crazy and I just... I started doing this thing with him, it's probably really annoying and you'll probably think I'm annoying right now when I tell you this, but I started doing this thing when he'll jump out, we're talking and he'll just start talking on his phone. I'm like, oh, okay, and so I'll just continue to kind of converse with them while he's on the phone, you know? And he'll be, hey, what's going on? Not much, man. I'm good, you know, I'm good. How are you doing? And he's like, oh man, we got to get together. I'm like, what are you talking? We're together right now. We're here together. Man, we're going to play ball soon. I'm like, no dude, we're on our way to ball, you're confusing me right now. What's going on? And I'll just like step into this place of annoying. It's that older in me maybe you know he's going to be annoying it, but you're never really together. And we think this thing is supposed to, and it really should help us connect

in deeper ways yet doesn't it do the opposite sometimes? It stunts deep rooted interaction and connection with those that God has placed in our life that can be a true blessing.

Sean Parker, one of the architects of, of Facebook, he gave this uniquely candid interview last year in Philadelphia. I don't know if you saw this, but, really fascinating. Here's what he said. He said the thought process was how do we consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible. Whenever someone likes or comments on a post or photograph, he said, we give you a little dopamine hit. We're soothing ourselves, right? It's kinda like a candy bar, you know, you're hungry, you exercise, and you just need something to soothe and so you grab a candy bar and you eat it and it does that, it soothes you but we can't live on candy bars, can we? And that's kinda what we do, we end up cutting off these other sources of nutrients into our soul and we're just eating candy bars and we're just getting these little hits of dopamine throughout our day and that's what we kind of lean into.

And Nicholas Kardaras former Stony Brook Medicine clinical professor goes so far as to liken screen time to digital cocaine. And maybe you say, oh, that's a little far, that's hyperbole, right? That I don't know about that and I disagree with that, but I just have a kind of a crazy question. I wonder from when the service started until now, how many people have checked their phone. No shame here. No shame. Just how many, right? Like, and here's the thing, a bunch of us raised our hand, but I think there's probably a lot more of us, cause I took a peek back and I saw maybe a few but here's the thing, I believe you that you didn't, but I think it's so second nature to us that we don't even know, you know, we just pull it out and we're comfortable. And even I had it up here for a minute ago and I'm like, this feels natural. I could talk the rest of my sermon like this cause it's so natural; we just have it in our hands. Oh, I need to check and make sure, oh man thing. You know maybe I need to pick something up or you know, we're constantly connected here instead of connected with the people who are right in front of us, the people who are with us.

Studies show that we are happiest when we are present with whomever or whatever is in front of us. This is the fact of the matter. Social media gives us the illusions of connection without the demands of relationship. There's a great book called 'Alone Together' that explores this idea. It explores the idea of we are lonely, yet we don't pursue intimacy because intimacy requires risk and requires stepping out in uncomfortability. Studies reveal that the most essential and intimate form of connection is eye contact. But social media is the opposite because social media is all verbal communication and that's not even heard verbal, right? It's verbal kind of in your mind so you don't hear intonation or volume but that's not even my point, my point is that that we don't see the face to face interactions and the little, you know, when you smile, you can see the wrinkles in the eyes and you can see that the eyebrows in an apology and all these things, these nonverbal communication forms that we relate with.

There's a scripture at the end of 1st Corinthians chapter 13 verse 12 says, *"¹² For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known."* This is a secondary point of the end of this passage but I think it's fascinating because the scriptures teach us that you can't be fully known or know fully just by seeing a reflection or an image or a picture or a photo or a video. You can't know fully or be

fully known until you're face the face. You have dimensionality, you have 40 x you can feel and see and experience and connect with one another.

Mental Health Research shows that what heals us is conversations, appropriate physical touch and words of affirmation, things that happen when we come together in this house. Those things don't automatically happen by the way they happened by intention, by a stepping and connecting in relationship. Hey, little buddy.

All right, misconception number four, I'm destined for loneliness for my life. David said in Psalm Chapter 23, *"even though I walk through the Valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."* Why? Because thou are with me. There is a relationship in the Father that is available for you today if you're willing to step towards our Father. You can step into that. Remember and the Old Testament back in first Kings 19, Elijah is so alone and he's in a cave and God calls him out and the scriptures say, remember this, the scripture to say that the wind came, he wasn't in the wind, the earthquake came and God wasn't in the earthquake, the fire came and he wasn't in the fire. And then what came? A gentle whisper and he was in the gentle whisper.

{There's a bug flying around} Come here, bug, I'm trying to pet him. Man, that guy's aggressive.

And he came in the gentle whisper. That's a prayer that I pray over this house. It's a prayer I pray over the car barn already. God come in the gentle whisper I pray and he says unto God, I'm alone, though. And God says no. There are 7,000 other people that haven't bowed their knee to Baal. And we think we're alone, we have misconception, we have misperception, we have misbelief, but yet God is teaching us in our loneliness as well as others and he's going to bring us together, that's a lie we are not destined to beat loneliness.

Last misconception is this; I can't do anything about loneliness. I've had a couple of points in my life where I felt completely alone. And it's not that I didn't have friends, I have people that I hang out with, but I just felt disconnected or not truly with them. And I get frustrated at God in those moments. God, why are these people this way? Or why haven't they done this? Or why haven't you and each season I felt this conviction, you need to go be this type of friend to other people before you request it to happen to you. And so I'm called out of myself to go and have conversations and so I commit to that in those seasons, I'll go have conversations that go deep underneath the surface, sometimes you can't just live in that surface level. So I take it there and response happens or I decide I'm going to go, I'm going to just be that supportive friend for this person. I'm just going to go and be there, I'm going to be annoyingly right there in their business and I'm going to show up and keep showing up. And I take things to certain depths or spiritually I want to get to a certain intensity and so all of invite people into that mix of seeking God at a deeper level. But I've found here's what happens when I do this 'give and it shall be given unto you'. Every time I be what I want to see, God shows up in only the capacity that he can show up in others and community comes around me. There can be done, you can step out; give without trying to get back. Just give of yourself, be supportive, decide to take a meal to somebody who's in need, decide to be a friend, the type of friend that you desire in your own and just be that for somebody else. Be It for multiple other people and God will bless it and he will bring people around you.

Listen, learn to be fully present, learn to be with. I've learned that it's amazing when I put this thing down with my kids and I'm with them but you know, just looking here and there, but when I just put it away or turn it off or I put it on my pocket and then conversation opens up and we'll start joking or we'll start laughing but I engage in different ways when I just release that and let go of it and I'm fully with. Do we understand what it means to be with, to be present, not to just make a comment on somebody's thing or to say this or that. No, like just be with somebody, be around them, be present and see what the Lord does. I think we also, we can have an effect on the epidemic of loneliness.

That's what it's called by our government. I went on DCRA, I went on some government websites and it's called the epidemic of loneliness in our society. We can make an impact, we can push the statistics. A family is not just a husband and a wife and 2.4 kids. That's not what it is. That's a definition of family, but there's a family of God that the scripture talks about that we all have the same blood line and who do you invite in your circle of family? Who do you invite in your circle of friends? Make an invitation into your home, make an invitation to your party, make an invitation to that gathering of people that you have, make an invitation to the family reunion that you have, but invite people into your circle.

One of the greatest losses that we had last year when we lost Becky and she was such a, it was about six months ago, she was such an amazing part of this conversation. What I loved about Becky though, was that she drew the circle of family in ways that wasn't normally drawn and so she committed her life to adoption and foster care and deep friendships and the family of God. This is what she committed her life to, to the point that it was about a year ago, and we've told this story, but you know, it was about she got cancer about six months later God took her home early. And it was about a year ago though that we had Becky get up on stage and that morning in our gathering, we prayed over families and it was Becky and one of her mentees Keri one of her family members that she invited into her life and they came up here and together they prayed over us as a congregation and they prayed in our city, in our nation for this idea of family, we can make an impact on the sense of loneliness. We have a calling in this space and in this place. Church, we have an invitation from the Lord in our own walk, in our own life and in those who are sitting around us and those who are in our neighborhoods.

And this morning we're going to, Josh, why don't you guys go ahead and come. We're going to have just some moments of worship and fellowship with the Spirit today. I want to encourage you to step into these moments and to allow the Spirit of God to minister to you today, to have some time of being alone in which you fellowship with the Father. And you know it's okay to pray for somebody around you too. It's okay to introduce yourself to somebody around you as well. We're going to step into this moment, but we're going to allow the Spirit to speak to us and here's how I just want to close out my time and then we'll step into worship. But I'm going to let Becky and Keri just pray us into these moments from a year ago. She's not physically here with us, but the same spirit in her is here today.

Becky: I'm here with my friend and sister Keri Richmond. Keri has worked with me at the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute and has represented the voice of foster youth, people with lived experience in foster care and I think together we wanted to pray because we

represent what family can look like outside of the traditional version of it. So what we're going to pray together. Join us in prayer.

Our father, we thank you that you designed family, you set the lonely in families and you want each of us to have hope for our family. And power every father, mother, sister, and brother here with your abiding love so, we can show this world your beauty and grace through our families. Strengthen us. Give us generous hearts that expand the reach of our own homes to those who need a place to belong. Thank you that you hear the cry of the orphan, the abandoned widow and the widower and the aged. You set a table for them in your own home, filled with the richest of fare and offered them the full inheritance. Our Father, please give each of us the vision for our unique role within our families and for extending the sacredness of family to those who have not yet tasted and seen that you and family are good.

Keri: Father, God we thank you for the sacred gift that is family and that there's no cookie cutter image for what family looks like. It can, but it doesn't always have to be blood. We praise you for the creative ways you bring family together. We also acknowledge that there are broken families. We know there are over 400,000 kiddos whose families were not able to care for them that are in foster care in our country each one trying to navigate what family means for them. We lift up these kids in prayer today and ask that you would bring them right people into their lives for them to lean on for support. God, we ask that you would show them your tender, nurturing patient, teaching Father heart, and let them know and walk freely in your unchanging, outrageous, reckless, and radical love for them. We love you, Father. Thank you for the gift of family. Amen.