Third Places

"Building Blessing," adapted from Karen Lewis Foley

May we honor and hold gently our past.
May we live fully our present.
May we hope toward and build our future,
May these walls breathe with the hope, faith and love of the ages.
May they be like arms that reach outward to embrace
Our community and our beautiful and broken world,
Extending our ministry to all
With healing, justice, service, and love.

message: If you would, think back over the past week or two and the places you have been outside of work or home. Of the places that are coming to your mind that aren't work or home, take away those that were about shopping or running an errand. So beyond work, and our home, and places we went to in order to take care of our needs, like a bank or grocery store, how many other places did you go with the potential to nourish our social selves? Did you arrange to meet friends or family at a restaurant or café? Went to an outdoor market or fair? Met a workout buddy at the gym or yoga? Some of us might be thinking, huh, I'm having to go back further than a week or two before I can think of something I did beyond work, or errands, or time among the people in my immediate household.

The reason I had us do this little memory exercise of what we have, or have not done, of late, is because I wanted to get us all thinking about third places. Sociologists have been using the concept of third places for some time. The idea was popularized by this book, titled *Bowling Alone*, published in 2000. The author, Robert Putnam, used research and statistics about the 1970s-1990s to make a case that social capital was diminishing in the US. Social capital are the networks of relationships and connections among people in a society that contribute to that society functioning effectively. Let's take a moment to explore social capital in modern US history.

Social capital was in a horrible condition in the Gilded Age, referring to the time after the civil war until the start of the 20th century. Industrialization provided jobs and brought in millions of immigrants. Those immigrants from eastern and southern Europe and eastern Asia were met with strong nativism and xenophobia. Industrial jobs were horribly exploitative. Urban poverty and poor living conditions were widespread. Wealth gaps between the haves and have nots widened significantly. Jim Crow segregation kept black people marginalized. And the last indigenous nations were defeated and removed. Political corruption, monopolies, unsafe workplaces,

contaminated food, air, and water were at all time highs. By all sorts of measures, we were very far from a cohesive and peaceful society living our best lives in the late 19th century.

To combat the ill effects brought by the rapid changes of industrialization, all sorts of grassroots groups emerged in the 20th century: labor unions, League of Women Voters, NAACP, Red Cross, Sierra Club, and you get the idea. A range of new organizations to improve the new problems brought by modern life. Participation in groups of these kinds grew steadily over the course of the 20th century. But as you can see on this graph [slide] membership peaked in the 1960s.

Putnam noted that American participation in many areas declined between the 1970s and 2000. He makes clear this is not just the typical nostalgic claims that things aren't like they used to be. Community has eroded. People don't care as much as they used to. Putnam says this can be backed up statistically. For example, from 1980-1993, there was a 10% increase in the number of Americans who bowled, but a 40% decrease in Americans participating in bowling leagues. Hence the title of his book, *Bowling Alone*. There was a 30% decrease in families involved in parent-teacher associations, from the 1960s to 1980s. From the 1970s to the 1990s, there was a 45% decline in the number of times families who entertained others in their homes. And as we're seeing on this graph, membership in national organizations with chapters declined to where it had been in the depression. Using statistics such as these, Putnam tracked a general decline in political, civic, and religious participation from the 1970s onward.

Why is that? Some pretty significant social and economic changes have altered how many people behave in the last five decades. The economic prosperity our country had enjoyed in the 50s and 60s took a dive in the 70s with stagflation and skyrocketing oil prices. For many this meant longer working hours and a greater sense of financial vulnerability, making people more cautious about spending money on leisure. Suburban sprawl has led to more time dedicated to commuting as a part of work, and a greater spatial separation between work, home, and shopping and leisure. Average commutes for American have gone up 27% since 1980. The famous historian Lewis Mumford once wrote that "Suburbia is a collective effort to lead a private life." Suburbs are introverted; urban areas as extroverted. The growth of television as entertainment increasingly gave us less need to leave our homes, and first cable and later streaming makes that even easier. These changes, and more, have led to a greater sense of isolation from the 1970s onward.

Putnam was writing about the 70s-90s. There is nothing to suggest trends toward increased feelings of loneliness have changed since 2000. If anything they're likely worse. Putnam saw promise in the internet. And to be sure, the internet has made it possible to connect with people all over the world in ways we couldn't have guessed or imagined decades ago. Yet the ability to form virtual communities comes at a cost. That social media is bad for us has been demonstrated beyond doubt, but many people can't stay away despite it. Smart phones can do incredible things. But phones can make us lonely even when we're with people. [2 images] These photos were

taken by photographer Eric Pickersgill. As he encountered friends and strangers, he asked them to remain in position, and later photoshopped out their phones.

And then, to literally save our lives, we all went into quarantine in early 2020. Rates of anxiety and depression among U.S. adults were about four times higher between April 2020 and August 2021 than they were in 2019. And with good reason! We were all quarantined. People were dying from covid. The economy was in a downward spiral. And we had a president at the time who, on national news, said maybe we could put a shot of bleach up peoples noses. Really filled us with confidence that we had a leader who understood how to guide us through a public health disaster. All any of us could do is get by the best we could under some very scary and trying circumstances.

As I was working on this sermon, I encountered a word I found very insightful. Perhaps some of you might too: atrophy. Social skills, just like muscles, atrophy when we don't use them. Research on isolated populations, like soldiers, astronauts, and prisoners, have demonstrated this to be true.[1] And this is true for everyone, even extroverts and those who find social situations easier. Clearly those who find social situations less easy will feel this even more.

Someone who has been bedridden for a time is not going to leap from the bed and sprint across the room. Similarly, someone who has been living in quarantine is not going to spring forth from their front door and become the epitome of a social butterfly full of boundless energy and grace. When we are isolated from other people for an extended period of time, all of us will end up feeling awkward, socially anxious, and less able to tolerate social discomforts that used to feel ordinary. Clearly we'll experience that in all sorts of different ways depending on our personalities and social resources. Yet all of us needed to rework our social muscles with greater social awkwardness than was true prior to quarantine.

Do any of these indicators of social awkwardness sound familiar to anyone: (1) Not being able to understand subtle aspects of social situations or how to behave, (2) Feeling like you have become oversensitive or hypervigilant, (3) Doing things that seem inappropriate, such as oversharing during a conversation, (4) Wanting to be around other people but then finding it hard when you actually do spend time with them, (5) Making excuses for doing things such as saying that you are too tired, (6) Choosing solitary activities over social activities. The good news is that we had, and are having, the same experience together.

And so, here we are, in 2025, with these twin forces at work on us: changes of the last few decades generating an increased sense of isolation and loneliness, and social atrophy as a result of sustained quarantine. Credible sources like Psychology Today and Harvard Magazine indicate that loneliness remains a significant concern in the US. More people feel lonely in 2025 than was true a few decades ago. Some of that may be prompted by the bowling alone trends we discussed earlier. Some of that may be prompted by post-quarantine

[1] Oluwafemi FA, Abdelbaki R, Lai JC, Mora-Almanza JG, Afolayan EM. A review of astronaut mental health in manned missions: Potential interventions for cognitive and mental health challenges. *Life Sci Place Res (Amst)*. 2021;28:26-31. doi:10.1016/j.lssr.2020.12.002

social atrophy. I suspect that for many people, it is probably both of those things. Reported rates of loneliness are especially high for men, young adults, those in lower-income households, and single people. And regionally, people in New England and big cities report higher degrees of loneliness, giving credence to the expression of being alone in a crowd. Rates of loneliness are also higher among those with heavy social media usage.

I suspect that some of today's material isn't new for many of us. And that's because we all have some degree of awareness and experience with how we've been impacted by bowling alone sorts of changes and our quarantine experiences. Consider today a reminder or a warning bell depending on how much each of us needs to think about our social health.

I know I'm feeling it. And that is why, about two months ago I decided to contact a nonprofit as a way of doing good in the world, but also widening my own social horizons and meeting a new group of people. They've since invited me to join their board. Seems unlikely they would have randomly knocked on my door one day or somehow found me. I had to take the initiative myself. Just as muscular atrophy is overcome one movement at a time until we can steadily do more each time, so too can social atrophy be overcome one encounter or one initiative at a time until we build and improve our social muscles.

Let's return to where we started, in thinking about third places—places other than home and work that allow us to exercise our social muscles. Where are your third places? What could be some new third places that would be of benefit to you and yours? And, of course, you're in a third place right now. The most effective third places for building real community are not virtual ones, but rather physical places where people can easily and routinely build connection and reciprocity. For those of you whose relationships with UUCM may be more past tense than present, know that this place and its people will always welcome you. You are always welcome to return again. For those of you currently in relationship with UUCM, deeper relationships are always a possibility. Talk with our DLRE and I about how. I will note that participation in a religious community generally correlates with better health outcomes and longer life, higher financial generosity, and greater domestic stability. The benefits of community that derive from involvement in third places beyond work and home are very real.

Whether renewed or deeper relationship with UUCM is or is not in your future, I encourage all of us to consider our social health. What are we going to do to overcome social atrophy? Where will we find greater social richness for our lives beyond home and work? Isolation and loneliness are very real parts of modern life. Let us all be mindful of that and do what we can for ourselves, and for one another, to become stronger and healthier social animals tomorrow.