During 2014, the other clergy and I are preaching on 52 words from the Bible. A word a week. These are foundational words for our journey of discipleship. Today the word is “Alone.”

10Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then the LORD became very angry, and Moses was displeased. 11So Moses said to the LORD, “Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? 12Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child,’ to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors? 13Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, ‘Give us meat to eat!’ 14I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. 15If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once—if I have found favor in your sight—and do not let me see my misery.”

16So the LORD said to Moses, “Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tent of meeting, and have them take their place there with you. 17I will come down and talk with you there; and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them; and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself.

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There’s a bad word in the Bible! The word is “alone.” In the creation story, God created everything and called it good, except for one thing.

Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone,…” (Gen. 2:18a)
It’s not good that humankind be “alone.”

So, mosquitoes and snakes are good! Wild bear, poison ivy, spiders, mice, bats and even termites are all good! But being alone is not good.

The Hebrew word used here means essentially, “isolation or separation,” as a stick is separated from a tree. So this isn’t talking about being by yourself from time to time. Jesus took time to get away from his disciples and the crowd to be by himself for prayer. He also taught us to “…go into your room, shut the door and pray to your Father…” (Matt. 6:6a) Being by ourselves is not a bad thing, but being alone is something else.

- To be alone is to have no one who cares about you.
- To be alone is to have no one wonder where you are or what you’re doing.
- To be alone is to have no one remember your birthday or to be with you on Christmas morning.
- To be alone is to be isolated from community, to be alone is to be separated, like a stick from its tree.

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So we come to this place in the wilderness where Moses prays;

‘Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, “Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child,” to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, “Give us meat
to eat!” I am not able to carry all this people (Here it is!) **alone**, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once—if I have found favor in your sight—and do not let me see my misery.’ (Numbers 11:11-15)

The word Moses uses here is the same word used in the creation story – “**alone.**” The root word in Hebrew is “לֵוָד,” meaning, “**separation**” or “**apart.**” It is not good to be separated or apart from others, in any context.

I call this the “**Kill-Me Prayer!**” In other words, I would rather be dead than to be detached or isolated. In fact, to be isolated or detached is a form of death. To be **alone** is a place of desperation.

There are a lot of people who pray the “**Kill-Me Prayer,**” maybe not to die but for God to get me out of this. You come to a place where you just don’t have what it takes. It’s past you. It’s more than you can manufacture. If God doesn’t show up, then we might as well turn out the lights! I can’t do it “**alone.**”

We weren’t built to be **alone.** We were built to be in a herd, to be in community with one another. We were built to stay connected to the tree. We aren’t separate sticks who can live on our own. Pull a stick off a tree and it dies. It needs the nourishment from the roots and trunk of the tree. It’s a system that has to be maintained. We live in a system, a community, and we thrive off the nourishment from it. You wither and die without it.

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Hardly a month goes by in which there is not at least one article or news story about some corporate executive, government official, educator or pastor who has spun out, crashed and burned. Maybe it was a mid-life crisis. Maybe it was greed or the lust for power. Maybe it was from swimming in water over their head and faking it all day. It could be from selling out their value system for the god of success. Whatever it was, they end up with anxiety, depression, feelings of emptiness and burnout.

Some turn to drugs and alcohol to try to fill their emptiness. Others cross ethical and marital boundaries in search for something. It’s no wonder the term “stress-management” became a part of our vocabulary in the past 30 years. “I am not able to carry all this people alone…” (11:14a) prayed Moses. It’s never good. It never works.

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I’m not sure any of us fully encounter God until we come up against our own limitations. As long as we’re self-sufficient, what’s the point? It’s when we can’t do it that we begin to learn something about who God is. But people like us rarely get to that place in life where we “can’t do it.” I’ve often said about this congregation that you can “throw them a bone and they’ll design a dog – three dogs, all of different colors!” That’s a blessing and a curse. Sometimes our strength gets in the way of us seeing our dependency upon the Lord. “Just give us the task and we’ll do it...until we can’t.” That’s where Moses seems to be.
So where do we encounter that place of limitation? What does it take for us to get in touch with the fact that we are the creature and not the Creator? I wouldn’t wish a crisis on anyone, but every crisis provides an opportunity for us to know God in deeper and more meaningful ways.

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Moses prays for God to kill him if this is the way it is going to continue to be, but instead of killing Moses, look what God does.

16 So the LORD said to Moses, “Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tent of meeting, and have them take their place there with you. 17 I will come down and talk with you there; and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them; and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself.’

(11:16-17)

God gives Moses 70 elders to help him lead the people of Israel. God puts him in community, reattaches the stick to the tree, and removes the isolation. The Spirit of God is dispensed among the community of leadership.

This is the first time in the Bible where God makes a shift from using only individuals in leadership to using a team. Moses gets 70 elders. Jesus chose 12 disciples to be with him in leadership. Did he need them? I don’t think so, in fact, it looks like they were in the way most of the time! He taught them. He empowered them. He
gave them the keys and they became the leaders of the church. Even Jesus did not choose to work in isolation or to be alone.

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Alone is a bad word, but that’s a good thing.

There’s a word of hope here for someone who is separated or in isolation. You weren’t built to go through whatever you are going through alone. You need to be in community.

There’s also a word in here for the Church – to be a place of hospitality in which relationships are created and nurtured; to be a place of welcome, fellowship, compassion, and genuine love for all people. Church is a business – it’s a family. It could be said that the success of any church is found in the quality of its relationships, not in how many people there are, but in how few have to live alone.

And, there’s a word here for the world. God did not create anyone to live in isolation, separation or despair. We weren’t made for homelessness or hunger, violence or war. We weren’t created to live your days detached and alone. There’s more to life than that.

‘Go to the tent of meeting, says the Lord, and I will put some of my Spirit within you and put you back into community, so that you will not have to bear your burdens – alone.’ (paraphrased Numbers 11:16-17)

Alone is a bad word – and that’s a good thing!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen