

HIGH LONESOME – A SPIRITUAL CRISIS

Week #3 of a 6-Week Series Inspired by the Brené Brown Book, “Braving the Wilderness”

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You know, I think we all like to be liked. We all like to be included. We all like to be just a part of the group and not left out.

So, most of you probably know I was born in Trinidad – in the Caribbean. And when I was about 6 or 7 years old, we moved up to Canada. And I remember the first day of school. And so it was not only a new school; it was a new country. A new people. A new way of life. And so, I was a little anxious and nervous; wanted to fit in, of course. Wanted everybody to like me.

And then there was a new sport called football, because in the Caribbean soccer is the game. So, I didn't know any of the rules. But what they were doing was picking up teams. And the one guy was saying, “I'll have him,” and the other guy, “I'll have him.” So I'm the last pick, and the guy who got to pick me said, “No, you can have him.” It's not just the last pick, but the guy didn't even want me.

And so, they kicked the ball ... And I don't know all the rules, but they kicked the ball to me. And I see all these Caucasian young guys who look rough and tough coming towards me. And I start putting on moves and running like Forrest Gump. And amazingly, I scored a touchdown. In fact, every time I touched the ball, which was three times, I scored a touchdown. And they were all patting me, the guys, and loving me up, and shaking me, and doing all this stuff.

And then the next day, the same two guys were picking up. And the same guy that didn't want me on the last day, I was the first pick that day. I thought a lot about that day, but what I want to focus on is: it was really good to feel liked.

Now, I happened to like football, and I learned, and I enjoyed it. But I would have done stuff I didn't like to be liked. It sounds silly, but sometimes to be liked, we will act in ways that aren't true to who we are. We will say and do things that we really don't feel or mean just so that people will like us. Sometimes we seek approval and validation and acceptance by acting in the way we think people want us to act that is sometimes different than who we are and who we want to be.

And it can sound like, “Well, that's no big deal. You say something or do a little something, so someone want to like you. What's wrong with that?”

Here's what Brené Brown says on that. She says research in social psychology confirms that when we betray our own values to fit in, anxiety and depression increases. But when we act congruently with our values, even when it's uncomfortable, our self-respect and our resilience grows.

See, who we are and how we behave in alignment with who we are actually matters. And it matters on a level that we sometimes don't even realize.

So, let me ask you, where in your life are you living a little bit out of alignment? Where in your life are you compromising who you really are to maybe please someone else? And what ways are you not living as authentically and being true to yourself as you can be?

You know, we all want to belong. We want to belong so much that we will even settle for a false sense of belonging. And part of the reason is because we say we all want to live authentic lives. We all say that. We all want to be true to ourselves. But sometimes the pressure is really hard. Sometimes it takes more courage than we want to put out there. It takes emotional strength. It takes mental fortitude. It takes

honesty. And it takes spiritual maturity to “brave the wilderness”: to truly be who we are and live our most authentic life.

Today's message is Week #3 of our six-week series, “Braving the Wilderness” by Brené Brown. My title is “High Lonesome -- a Spiritual Crisis.”

“High Lonesome,” she says, is a point of growth. It is about the discomfort and the pain that comes when you stand in your truth alone, even when people don't support or believe in you. High lonesome is when you choose to be true to yourself rather than just try to fit in or try to pretend. It's about refusing to conform to how others think you should act to stand in your own personal integrity.

So last September, I stopped drinking. And I really enjoyed wine a lot. A lot! So, for the first two months, every time I sit down to dinner, I thought, *“You know what? It'd be really nice to have a glass of wine right now.”* And so, it took a little while. And a couple of times I had some wine and had some wine. And my family, you know -- I'm one of 10 -- when we get together, we drink some wine.

And so, I was going on a Jamaican vacation with them a couple weeks ago, and I knew this since September. And so I was like, *“I wonder if I'm going to give in or actually just hold to my truth that I'm no longer going to drink alcohol.”* And especially with the kind of pressure with all your family drinking in front of you.

And so, we get to Jamaica. And so, on the first night, they're pouring wine. And I said, *“No; I've decided to stop drinking.”* And I have to say, they were so respectful. They didn't say, *“Hey, come on; just one!”* Or, *“Who are you kidding? You'll be drinking another glass before the end of the vacation.”* They didn't do any of that. And what was really cool about it: I felt really good in myself. I felt good in my body. I felt good about who I am. And I felt good that I made a change and, under conditions where I could have easily wavered, was able to still be true to myself.

It's those little things that make a huge difference in building our own integrity and living in alignment with who we came to be; living in alignment with our souls.

Think of the first time that you set a clear “no” when everyone expected you and wanted you to say “yes.” Think of the first time that you refused to listen or participate in gossip. Think of the times when you let go of a relationship that was unhealthy; that you hung on for months, and it took you awhile, but you eventually said, *“No; that's not for my highest good.”* Think of the time when you were honest with a friend when it was really uncomfortable to be so.

And the thing about all those -- as difficult as they can be -- afterwards you feel lighter. Afterwards you feel better. Afterwards you feel more connected and aligned.

Brené Brown says, *“Spirituality is recognizing and celebrating that we're all inextricably connected to each other by a Power greater than all of us, and that our connection to that Power and one another is grounded in love and compassion.”*

When we feel we don't belong -- when we feel we've been left out -- you know what human beings tend to do? They tend to do a thing called “sorting.” Bill Bishop wrote a book called “The Big Sort.” And what it is: it is a practice of separation. It is a way of protecting ourselves by creating divisions of people in between “us” and “them.” All forms of “us” and “them.” Republicans and Democrats is a good “us” and “them.” Christians and Muslims are a good “us” and “them.” Gender: “us” and “them.” Race: “us” and “them.” Vax and anti-vax: “us” and “them.” You know, NextGen and millennials; wealthy and poor.

That when we feel that we don't belong, we start segregating and separating, and usually into the ones we like. *“Okay, that's my group and that's not my group.”*

And in some ways, you would think, if you're getting into groups with your friends that are alike, and are like-minded, you'd think, wow; great! You'd be making more social connections. You'll be feeling closer. You'll be feeling more a part of the whole.

But you know what's really interesting? That when you sort and segregate into all kinds of groups, you actually have less social interaction. And more sorting begins: "us" and "them." And you know what's the most interesting part? The level of loneliness increases. It actually keeps us distant and separated by sorting.

And what this chapter is about is saying: When you hit that place, what are you going to choose to do? Are you going to choose to find connection? Or are you going to continue to sort and separate and create "us" and "them"?

Our country right now is pretty divided and split. It's pretty polarized. There's a lot of separation; there's a lot of disconnection; there's a lot of fragmentation. There's a lot of finger-pointing and blame. We are in a bit of a crisis.

But blame and finger-pointing and hatred takes us in the opposite direction of our nature, and the very opposite direction that we all want to go. We all want to be happy. We all want to live in harmony and peace and feel unified.

Brené Brown says, *"Clearly, selecting like-minded friends and neighbors and separating ourselves as much as possible from the people who we think are different from us has not delivered the deep sense of belonging that we are hardwired to crave."*

You know, experiencing loneliness is actually a natural part of life. It is actually a natural part of life. It is natural like hunger. It is natural like thirst. It's natural like pain. All of them are warning signs that we need to do something a little different to change. When you're hungry, you know, it's your body saying, *"Hey, your blood sugar is getting low; you'd better eat something."* Thirsty: you're getting dehydrated. It's a warning. It's a sign to help us.

But loneliness we don't see as a sign. You know what? Most of us are embarrassed to admit that we're lonely. You know, we're kind of ashamed. Nobody wants to admit that they're lonely.

And even hear the word like "loner." *"He was a loner."* You may as well say he was a loser or a weirdo. And I'm making a little fun here, but there's a very serious point of the epidemic of loneliness that is going on.

And partly it's how we're looking at it. Loneliness is a normal thing. Sometimes we feel socially isolated. And the thing about it is, if it's left unchecked ... See, like if we see this a warning sign, it means, *"Hey, I need some social connection. There's a part of me feeling disconnected."* And we'll get in a minute to how we can connect.

But when it's left unchecked, it can lead to even more loneliness and more loneliness ... and getting to a place where we're afraid to reach out. We're afraid to make friends. You know, we get less and less friends as we get older? And we don't replenish those. People move; all kinds of things happen, and we don't replenish. And we're afraid to actually reach out. We'd rather stay home in front of the TV or go do something that doesn't include reaching out and connecting to people. Having conversations, having friends gets harder because we fall into this trap. We're alone, but we don't want to reach out and connect.

Here's a study on the impact of loneliness. Air pollution increases the body's chances of dying early by 5%. Living with obesity increases your chances of dying early by 20%. Excessive drinking increases your

chances of dying early by 30%. And living with loneliness -- I'm talking chronic loneliness -- increases your odds of dying early by 45%.

We are in some unhealthy patterns as a nation, as a community ... but even within ourselves and our own lives. And it's going to take some courage to bring back a level of connection, a level of wholeness, a level of oneness, connection. It'll take courage. It'll take courage to overcome these patterns.

Like, you ever disagree with someone, and you just push them out of your life? You ever do that? You kind of separate yourself? And you think it's a good thing. And sometimes boundaries are, so I don't want to say they're not. But sometimes we get into that pattern so much -- reversing that separating and that sorting, knee-jerk reaction, is going to take some courage. Because we can't keep distancing ourselves from everybody we don't like.

Three things of courage we need.

First one is **THE COURAGE TO RECOGNIZE WHEN WE SORT**. To recognize when I'm separating as an "us" and "them." You know, feeling disconnected; pushing people away; labeling people -- "*They're bad. They are wrong. We are right and they are wrong.*" Or worse: "*They are not like us.*" And whether it's race, religion, gender, wealth, politics, we need to recognize when we have that behavior of separation.

The second one is **COURAGE TO CONNECT**. In the book of Deuteronomy, Chapter 31, Verse 6, it says, "*Be strong and courageous, for the Lord your God goes with you.*" Now, in Unity, "the Lord your God goes with you" means the indwelling presence of the Lord is always with you. Spirit is always with you.

And there is the courage, as it says in the Psalms, to "*Be still and know.*" If we really want to transform our lives -- we really want to not feel separate and reconnect and know our wholeness and our Oneness -- we need to have the courage to connect with the oneness within. To be still and know.

A study said people who practice intentional solitude have higher levels of creativity, clarity and emotional regulation. That the more time we spent in silence -- being still with intention of knowing our oneness with God; more conscious of that oneness with God -- the more we tap into our deeper spiritual power; into wisdom and guidance and inspiration; peace and clarity.

2 Timothy, Chapter 1, Verse 7 says, "*God has not given us a spirit of fear, but a spirit of power, love, and self-discipline.*" We have the courage to do the work that's needed to transform and change and turn things around in our own lives, as well as in our community and our country and world, I believe.

You know, connection with the Source is a huge thing that we have to do.

And then we also need to work on our connection with the people in our lives. Not only the closest people, which is important, but also the "any" people in our lives. You know, the stranger or the cashier; your barista. We need to say "*Hi*" and smile and make connections with all people.

I read a study that said it isn't just the people you're closest to that play a role in you living happier and longer. It's actually anybody -- the doorman, the bus driver, the whoever; the more people you say hi to make a connection with and smile, it actually increases our energy. It increases their energy. There's an aliveness that begins to happen just by opening the door for somebody. The simplest acts of choosing to consciously engage increases that level of connection and the life force that we all share.

I mean, wouldn't it be cool to wake up and say, "*I am going to brighten someone's day today.*" And I bet you it'll be a lot easier than you think.

And the third one is **THE COURAGE TO BE VULNERABLE**. The courage to be vulnerable. Nobody likes being vulnerable. It feels like we're going to get hurt. Vulnerable feels scary, like you've got to walk at the edge of a cliff. And we get scared of the fear of getting rejected; the fear of failing; the fear of looking

bad; the fear of looking weak; the fear of being alone; The fear of losing what we have. All of these things stop us from living. We're afraid to be vulnerable. We get tight. We withdraw. We don't want to share anything about ourselves.

And the truth is: if we want connection -- if we want deeper levels of love and closeness and intimacy -- that it has to have ourselves making a commitment to being more vulnerable in certain areas and relationships of our lives.

So, where in your life -- in your relationship, in your workplace, with your family -- can you practice being a little bit more vulnerable? And being more vulnerable is not as difficult as you think. It could be as simple as saying to someone close, *"You know, I'm really struggling right now."* Or, *"You know, I could really use some help."* Or, *"I made a mistake and I'm really embarrassed about it."*

Or when we disagree with someone, just saying, *"You know, I see that a little differently."* And actually saying your opinion without hostility, instead of withholding it and feeling resentment.

Vulnerability is about opening our hearts and just sharing the truth of wherever we might be in that moment. It isn't as complicated or as scary as we think. And, yes; sometimes we share some stuff with someone we like, and they'll step away. But guess what? There will be other people who will step into our lives and have us be even more fulfilled if we're willing to be a little more vulnerable.

Brené Brown says, *"Courage spreads when one person speaks up; one person shares with vulnerability; one person sets a boundary; one person forgives. Courage gives us the permission to awaken to our true selves."*

So, the more we demonstrate courage and vulnerability, guess what? It liberates other people in our lives to do the same. "High Lonesome" is about making a spiritual breakthrough. It's about standing at the threshold of saying: *"Am I going to back down and just fit in? Or am I going to be true to myself? And do it in an honoring way so that I don't offend anyone, but I stay true to who I am?"*

And that really elevates us to a higher level of what I call spiritual maturity.

"I am one with God."

Together: [with congregants] *"I am one with God." Take a deep breath.*

"My courage awakens the courage in others."

Together: [with congregants] *"My courage awakens the courage in others." Deep breath.*

"I am brave enough to stand."

Together: [with congregants] *"I am brave enough to stand."*

"I am quiet enough to listen."

Together: [with congregants] *"I am quiet enough to listen."*

"I am faithful enough to trust."

[Congregants:] *"I am faithful enough to trust."*

"I live my values."

[Congregants:] *"I live my values."*

"I speak truth without hostility."

[Congregants:] *"I speak truth without hostility."*

"I extend compassion without surrendering my integrity."

[Congregants:] *"I extend compassion without surrendering my integrity."*

Last one, I promise! [Laughs]

"My courage awakens the courage in others."

Together: [congregants] *"My courage awakens the courage in others."*

You know, at the beginning of this chapter, she talks about what this "High Lonesome" means. And I didn't know what the source of it was. But she was saying about ... that this guy was running next to a train. And there were warriors, soldiers; and they were running along and they let out this yell. It was a yell of pain and a yell of freedom. It was a yell of misery and a yell of redemption.

"High Lonesome" is a sound or a type of music that has the power to render sorrow beautiful. To make loneliness a shared experience, and to transform despair into hope.

You know, music has the phenomenal power to capture both pain and deliver us from that pain. There are some songs that I love that are sad -- that break my heart -- and yet they give me joy or peace. Everybody remember Eric Clapton's "Tears in Heaven"? I mean, his son died, and yet there's something painful and healing about the song.

Tony Braxton's "Unbreak My Heart." You could feel the pain of a broken heart. And yet, in the singing of it, it makes you realize you could get over it one day. Or Foreigner's "I Want to Know What Love Is." You can feel the desperation, but also the hope that's there.

And, to me, that's what "High Lonesome" is -- is to say we're all struggling with pain. We're struggling! And we can choose to sort and think "us" against "them" ... or we could step towards vulnerability. We could step towards connection. We can step towards opening ourselves to a deeper and greater level of spiritual maturity.

God bless you all.