

Alone among friends

For my money, John's is the only Gospel in which Jesus seems really lonely.

by [Kat Banakis](#) in the [July 24, 2013](#) issue



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Picture what you think buildings at Yale University look like: maybe stone gothic or colonial Georgian with beautiful fireplaces and snifters of bourbon.

Now picture what would happen if a fifth-grade boy was given a piece of graph paper and a protractor and told to design the world's most elaborate ant farm, rampant with multilayer dead-end tunnels just to confuse the ants. Build a four-story mold from his model and fill it with wet concrete. Poke a couple of airholes in it for windows. Then spray it with mildew and Soviet malaise. That was my dorm for four years.

Given the choice, most people would go with the colonial Georgian option. But only legatees—children or siblings of other Yalies—had the option to live in the beautiful dorms their relatives lived in. The rest of us got the leftovers, including the weird 1970s architectural experiments. Most of my college friends lived in my dorm and were the first in their families to go to a place like Yale—many were the first to go to

college.

Yes, I went to Yale, but I'm the offspring of scrappy Chicago characters straight out of central casting for the Ellis Island immigrant experience. (One side's Greek, the other Irish.) My parents put themselves through city college but vowed from the moment they conceived of conceiving that their kids would go away to school. They meant only that I'd have the experience of living in a dorm, not that I'd go far away. I applied to only one school outside of the Midwest, just on a whim.

My mom said this about my acceptance letter: "Well, honey, you'll always be able to know that you were accepted to Yale."

"Mama, I want to go there."

"But we didn't save for that."

"But you told me to apply."

"I told you that you *could* apply. We never thought you'd get in."

It is a function of being human, and particularly an 18-year-old human, that we make decisions without being able to see their full impact. I was unaware of what it had taken for my parents to save as much as they had—and equally ignorant of what it would mean to work three work-study jobs at a time and take on student loans. I accepted my unlikely offer with the wonderful combination of faith and obstinacy possible in teenagehood—kind of like Mary, the mother of Jesus.

One of my parents' friends gave me a high school graduation card with a shark's tooth inside. The card read, "I just learned a new word this week—*talisman*. It means a good luck charm. Take this shark's tooth with you as a talisman of where you came from, a reminder to have adventures and to come back to us. We're all so proud of you." *Talisman, talisman, talisman*. I rolled the word around in my brain and slipped the shark's tooth into the Ziploc baggie of pens and pencils I took with me to college.

The first week of class, my professor of English led a discussion on the *Odyssey*. I thought this was a good start, Homer being Greek and all. It had taken me approximately 2 million hours to do the reading. I broke it down into 60-page increments, racing myself to improve my reading rate with each section. I was seriously hoping for a gold star for completion.

“Penelope,” the professor began, “uses the loom like some sort of talisman as she waits for Odysseus to return. But what is the countersymbolism between what is going on in Penelope’s home and what Odysseus is facing in the cave with the Cyclops?”

I wanted to be transported into a cave with a Cyclops, who would mercifully impale me on a blunt object and throw me into the sea. The fanciest word I had ever heard had just been dropped in passing! I had no idea how to answer the professor’s question; I could barely handle the reading itself. Yale and I had both made a horrible mistake.

Yale’s president had predicted as much. At our opening convocation he’d warned all the students and parents, “You will think at some point that an admission error was made. It was not. We chose you.” I wasn’t so sure.

When I got my *Odyssey* paper back, it had a jarring grade on the last page, along with the comment, “You write like a public school kid.” Guilty as charged. I was sure that I’d be found out as a fraud, sure that I’d fail. I studied like a fiend, signed up for every writing seminar and tutorial I could, and exploited my roommates’ editorial skills.

Each Sunday night I called my mom and wept, “I can’t do this. Everyone else has read more. They talk differently.”

“Everyone’s read more?”

“Well, I guess not everyone.”

“Find the others who look around the room the way you do.”

Sometimes I just wanted a break. “Mama, I want to come home for the weekend.”

“I know, honey. But we can’t afford that. This is part of the cost of going away.”

“I’m just so tired.”

“I know.”

Most weeks, at the end of the call when there was nothing left to say but I still felt so overwhelmed, my mom would suggest, “How about a prayer?” She’d pray with me over the phone for my professors and tutors and roommates and nascent

friendships—and for sleep.

We prayed, and I studied. I also began to host board game parties in my ever-ugly dorm room. I did this because when my family got together, we played games. Also, I figured that maybe I could build up good graces in case I was exposed for who I really was and expelled. *Kat? Kat who? Oh, that chick who hosted sort of weird social gatherings with Trivial Pursuit. She was nice enough.*

They came, they played, they conquered—and quickly. I had never seen a full game of Trivial Pursuit completed—with all the rules observed—in under an hour. I don't think I answered a single question. I just got to be surrounded by people I had begun to love and to watch the group cohere. Dorm mates became the sort of lifelong friends you get from going through a tough experience together. We're friends from a time when we were scared of being found out and kicked out and sent back to the communities that had worked so hard to launch us.

A few of us moved from the dorm that only an architect's mother could love to Washington, D.C. One was my friend Vid, who was attending law school there. We'd both spent our childhoods moving and constantly being new to a place, so we navigated that new city together, its ins and outs and unspoken rules, with the same determined intensity. We attended each other's parties—his bar review, my orphan Easter celebrations—even though neither of us was the target audience. We went because we cared about the host.

The year I went back to Connecticut to begin divinity school, Vid moved to San Francisco. Each time we talked, he bade me to come and join him. "You'd love the Bay Area," he promised. "Everyone's from somewhere else, like in D.C., but much more chill. I'm staying." During those years on opposite coasts, he began dating an Indian woman, and things moved quickly. I met her for the first time at their wedding, a grand affair complete with drum parades and fire ceremonies, mere days after I moved to northern California myself.

In my first six months in California I met her again several times, but I still didn't know her well. I knew that she was adorable—a lawyer and a dancer with a killer smile. She always brought a hostess gift and remembered birthdays (which I am horrible at), and she had thick, black, shiny hair that never stuck straight out from her head like my unfortunate combination of Einstein and Buckwheat stuck in a humidity chamber. Beyond that, I assumed that anyone my friend had chosen was

wonderful.

One night, in an attempt to feel at home in northern California, I invite people over to play games.

The snacks are out, the drinks are flowing, and we're about 45 minutes into a death match of Trivial Pursuit. The quiet folks are killing, as they always do. The doorbell rings, and Vid and his new wife are on the front stoop. She has brought a plate of cookies. Vid shrugs out of his raincoat and leans in to give a greeting hug. He whispers, "She doesn't do games."

This is going to be a hard one. Many of my friends are straight men. This means two things. First, we have rejected each other—explicitly or otherwise—as romantic partners. Second, when the guys choose a romantic partner, she becomes my primary point of contact and relationship with the couple. Call me old-fashioned; I say I'm just a pragmatist. Any time you have a friendship in which there could be sexual tension, it's wise to insulate against acting on that. I love my male friends, and I want to continue to be friends with them. We rejected each other as potential mates for good reasons, and I don't want to be even a tangential cause for stress in their romantic relationships.

It makes sense to cultivate a friendship with the woman my male friend has chosen. But the process is much easier when we're mostly alike: she's me, but Nordic or atheist or math-oriented. But games are so much a part of who I am—and Vid's wife doesn't do them. I know this sounds ridiculous and narcissistic, but somehow this seems like a rejection of *me*. I moved to California in part because of Vid, and now it turns out that his wife will be a tough transfer of friendship. What else doesn't she do? Does she not vote? Is she not an organ donor?

In moments like these, I have a very refined, specific panic response. It happens only when I am among people I care about, in a time and place when I should be in my social groove. It's happened to me at friends' weddings and at New Year's parties and at Fourth of July cookouts. It has happened to me while attending church events and leading worship. The common denominator is that I'm someplace where I expect to be having a great time with great people I know.

Then I'll make a joke that flops, or I'll suggest an activity no one else wants to do, or I'll try to launch a church initiative, or the conversation will move on its own in a direction I can't quite seem to connect to—and a Plexiglas wall descends between

me and the people I was just talking to.

It is the absolute worst, most condemning version of loneliness I know. In these moments, loneliness arrives like a quarantine vessel, and I am Bubble Girl, alone and isolated in the midst of everyone. I feel like I am enclosed in one of those plastic canisters that move through the vacuum tubes at the drive-up windows at the bank.

I should be on my A-game of integration and inclusion, and instead I'm alone in the crowd. I reframe my entire life as always being an outsider, and I project forward into a future of remaining outside. I will never be at home anywhere. No matter where I move, I'll always be an outsider.

The situation has all the makings of *la dolce vita*, and yet the very things that should alleviate loneliness—being with people I love, doing things I love—fail to keep loneliness at bay. I cannot trigger these responses, and larger life stressors don't bring them on. They just happen. My sense of loneliness amid people I love, and who love me, will always be part of my life. This makes me feel like a doomed loner.

It also makes me feel like a fraudulent Christian. Christianity, after all, is grounded in the notion of community. From the very earliest Christian communities mentioned in the book of Acts, Christians have lived out their love of God through their love for their fellow humans. As a clergyperson, part of my job is to foster the growth of human communities on earth, to encourage people to support one another as we try to serve God. Lord knows I preach and teach about this stuff—but how can I do this if I don't feel it or believe it myself?

What's more, the very knowledge of God in Godself is always communal in Christianity. God is always the Trinity; the divine is always a team. God as a title or method of address is always shorthand, an abbreviated title—like calling the movie *Precious* when its actual name is *Precious: Based on the Novel "Push" by Sapphire*.

Granted, Christians have long disagreed as to what exactly the Trinity means. In the East, the Cappadocians emphasized the three distinct beings (*hypostases*) more than the one essence (*ousia*). In the Latin-speaking West, Augustine emphasized the unity of the single substance (*substantia*) more than the three persons or roles (*personae*).

What Christians have always agreed about, however, is that God in Godself is a group of three. Community is big in Christianity. Really big. So suffice it to say that

when the Plexiglas tube of loneliness encases me—in the midst of a party at which I know everyone, because it's *my party*—I feel like a warped, antisocial freak and a Christian hypocrite.

At these moments I really, really want the Jesus portrayed in John's Gospel. John alone has Jesus change his followers' title from *disciples* to *friends*—and for my money, John's is the only version of the story in which Jesus seems really lonely even though he's with his friends.

Toward the end of John, Jesus and his friends are at a dinner party. He's trying to explain something about himself and his game plan for the future, but he just isn't connecting with them. At one point Philip tries to speak on behalf of the rest of the friends and ask for a point of clarification, which really frustrates Jesus. Even the one friend who Jesus loves more than all the rest—who is such a close friend that some translations say he's resting his head on Jesus' chest—doesn't throw Jesus a bone.

Jesus endears himself to me in these authentic, awkward moments, because maybe Jesus knows what it's like to be me. Maybe I'm not so alone in this experience of life. Maybe for Jesus, part of being human was having the same sense I do—that my true identity and belonging are stuck in another zip code that I can never quite seem to find. Or, as the psalmist writes in Psalm 119, "I am a stranger here on earth." I don't quite belong here—and maybe never will.

At that biblical dinner party, Jesus repeats a line over and over again: "I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and am going to the Father." It's almost like Jesus is reminding himself of who he is: *I'm part of something bigger. There is a bigger plan. I'm part of a unity of love.*

Then Jesus tells his followers that someone or something is to come after him and that this is also part of the plan. The *Parakletos*, Jesus says, will "bring to remembrance all I've said to you" and will "not leave you orphaned." Along with "Holy Spirit," *Parakletos* is sometimes translated as the "Spirit of Remembering" or the "Spirit of Reminding." Jesus is part of some larger effort, and some Spirit will come to remind Jesus' friends who he was.

I don't claim to understand how God works within Godself, or how you can have three things and one thing at the same time without doing fractions. What I do get is the irony in John's Gospel: when Jesus is most alone, he reveals himself to be part of a larger, collective whole. And when I am feeling most alone and isolated, God

reveals Godself to me as Trinity too. When I am among people yet at my absolute loneliest, if I can ward off the instinct to consume an entire platter of appetizers and thereby drown my woes in a self-induced carb Quaalude fog, sometimes I can hear a voice that sounds something like mine—but warmer—saying, “I know you’re sad. I know you’re scared. There was a before. There will be an after. Stay at the party.”

That voice, I have decided, is my experience of the *Parakletos*. It is probably around all the time, but I am most open to being reminded that I am connected to something bigger when I feel the most alone or the most afraid of remaining alone.

Blink. The experience I’m describing happens quickly; I am in and out of a wormhole in milliseconds. The intensity, though, is like tasting baker’s extract. To the casual observer, nothing has taken place. The coats are draped over my left arm, and in my right hand I’m holding the plate of cookies. No time has actually passed, and the evening is not derailed. I am still at the party, still have just had the experience of being isolated, and yet I am somehow integrated into something immeasurably greater than my personhood. The reassurance that I’m seen and affirmed and not alone allows me to do what the voice instructs—to stay at the party. With the Holy Trinity, I am a bit less fraudulent, a bit less alone, a bit more integrated.

I put the cookies on the table, get Vid and his wife drinks and return to the game. We laugh. We play. Vid’s wife even answers a few questions, shyly, by night’s end. The party is a success. We are spending time together and becoming part of something bigger than ourselves.

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