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Sermon of September 23, 2007 Dr. Jim Standiford

“CONNECTIONS THAT COUNT”

Luke 16:1-13

Eternal God, we pray thy kingdom come, thy will be done in each of our lives, as well as in all your earth. Amen.

Today I invite you to think with me about the third dimension for deepening our discipleship. First, we looked at being invited to faith and inviting others. Second, we spoke of learning about our faith. Today we consider connecting with God and those around us as real experiences of our faith.

St. Augustine stated simply and beautifully our need for connection with God when he said, “O Lord, our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee.”

Dante writes of our human connections very pointedly. In “Canto 10” of *Inferno*, he meets Farinata. These two fall into a “My daddy can lick your daddy” argument. Their relationship is party politics, mere rivalry to the hilt. There is no connection between them. In “Canto 11” and “Canto 12” of *Paradise*, Dante portrays St. Thomas, the Dominican, telling the story of St. Francis; and St. Bonaventure, the Franciscan, telling the story of St. Dominic. Both humbly speak of the great attributes of the founder of their rival order. Dante’s point is heaven is all about understanding those with whom you differ, especially to the point of emphasizing their positive qualities. It is about connections.

Lyda Judson Hanifan in 1916 wrote of our need for connections with those around us. He is said to have been the first to use the term “social capital,” in his discussion of rural school community centers. He was concerned about goodwill, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse as being elements that count the most in the daily lives of people who make up a particular social unit. Connections or relationships are at the core of any community. John Field in his book, *Social Capital*, states, “Trust between individuals becomes trust between strangers and trust of a broad fabric of social institutions; ultimately it becomes a shared set of values, and expectations within a society as a whole. Without this interaction, trust decays and severe social problems become more prominent.”

Robert Putnam in his book, *Bowling Alone*, brought to our attention individualizing factors of our present culture that work against strong social connections. (Among these he mentioned mobility, working multiple jobs, television, the internet, and virtual reality games.)

He famously pointed to the fact that in the time from 1980 to 2000 the number of people bowling increased but the number participating in leagues dramatically decreased.

Paul in his first letter to Timothy encourages his young church leader to connect with God in regular prayer and to offer supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings for everyone, including kings and others in high positions, because God desires everyone to be saved (1 Timothy 2:1-7). Paul is encouraging Timothy to keep both his vertical and horizontal connections strong.

In our scripture lesson today, Jesus tells the parable of the dishonest steward. First, let me say Jesus is not advocating dishonesty. What he points to in the parable is the shrewd manager takes decisive action to make connections with his master's debtors. This is the fourth parable told by Jesus in continuous sequence prompted by tax collectors and sinners coming to Jesus (making connections) and the Pharisees and scribes grumbling (not making connections). The four parables are about the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son, and today's parable of the dishonest manager. Luke seems to be leading us somewhere. A key word linking the lost son and the manager is the word "squander." The son squandered his property in loose living and the manager squanders his master's property. Both live carelessly.

After being fired, the manager quickly comes to the realization that generosity (albeit with someone else's goods) is the best policy. With generosity he acts intentionally and decisively to connect with others. It appears the wealthy owner turns to the manager he just fired to discover the secret of true wealth, generosity. Luke, in Acts 4, pushes this point further in his description of Christians after Jesus' resurrection, where very intentionally no one claimed anything as just theirs but the faith community held everything in common for the benefit of all (Acts 4:32). They were very intentional about making life-sustaining connections with each other.

Abraham Lincoln was very effective in connecting people with each other. Most obvious was his supreme commitment to preserving the union of all our states. Another example was in 1865 at the end of the Civil War. When the news spread of Robert E. Lee's surrender, thousands marched to the White House. Lincoln appeared on the balcony to address the crowd. They became quiet. In front of him was a band. Before he spoke he asked the band to play "Dixie." His was a decisive act toward connecting, especially with those who had been defeated.

The Bebemba tribe of South Africa has a unique manner of dealing with a member who acts irresponsibly or unjustly. They put the offending person in the center of the village, alone and unfettered:

All work ceases, and every man, woman and child in the village gathers in a large circle around the accused individual. Then each person in the tribe speaks to the accused, one at a time, about all the good things the person in the center of the circle has done in his lifetime. Every incident, every experience that can be recalled with any detail and accuracy is recounted. All his positive attributes, good deeds, strengths and kindnesses are recited carefully and at length. The tribal ceremony often lasts several days. At the end, the tribal circle is broken, a joyous celebration takes place, and the person is symbolically and literally welcomed back into the tribe.

The Bebembas know how to act decisively for connection.

Today we celebrate the Sacrament of Baptism. The sacrament reminds us of God's promise to love us with a grace that washes us and nourishes us. It reminds us of the gift of God's presence with us in the Holy Spirit, as the Spirit was with Jesus at his baptism. Lastly, the sacrament is the official entrance of an individual, whatever their age or place in

life, into the community of the universal church. All three of these are connections. While there is a focus on each child individually, the promises of God that we celebrate are to the individuals and the community, and the congregation promises to provide supportive connections to each child.

We have an emphasis on small groups in our congregation as well. Small groups are designed to focus primarily on deeper relationships, not instruction, service, or fellowship. Each of these is an important aspect of discipleship, but the function of an effective small group is to enhance spiritual development through trust-filled relationships. In small groups we can share our God-dreams, our spiritual questions, and have our relationship with Christ deepened. If you are not a part of some small group in this congregation, I certainly invite you to take decisive action toward doing so.

Bob Greene in his book, *Once Upon A Town*, tells a wonderful story of the town of North Platte, Nebraska. North Platte was located on the major rail line on which troop trains moved soldiers back and forth across our country during World War II. On Christmas Day, 1941, several people in North Platte learned that a train would be coming through carrying Nebraska boys. They rallied together to have sandwiches, cookies, and coffee ready for them for the train's fifteen-minute stop at their station. This group was all ready with their refreshments on the platform when the train finally pulled in. The townspeople were terribly disappointed because it turned out they met the wrong train. This one was full of boys from Kansas. After a moment's hesitation, they greeted and fed them anyway. After the train left, they decided to invite the whole town to organize, turn their depot into the "North Platte Canteen," and meet every train every day. This town of twelve thousand, and folks from over 200 neighboring communities, over the next five years met every single troop train (up to 23 per day, carrying three to eight thousand troops per day) that went through their town, no matter what time day or night. They figured they greeted 6 million soldiers in that five-year period. That is taking decisive action for connections on a grand scale. Greene's book is also full of accounts of many individual connections, some lifelong, made in this process.

Sandy Olewine, who for ten years was our United Methodist missionary in the Holy Land, spoke at our recent Pastors' School. She told of a time when she was in Bethlehem during one of the times of intense shelling of that town. A number of church folk had to hide in the church office for the duration of this bombardment, which lasted 19 days. While hiding and waiting they began to plan what they would do after the shelling to try to bring normalcy back to the lives of the children of Bethlehem. They developed a program called "Bright Stars for the Children of Bethlehem." It focused on music, dance and art emphasizing the values of peace and well-being, values of another child of Bethlehem, the one who became known as the Prince of Peace. They took decisive action to create connections for all the children of the town.

As you and I seek to be disciples of Jesus, let us allow ourselves to be invited into deeper faith in Christ and invite others to faith as well. Let us learn as we grow in our knowledge and experience of Christ. Let us take decisive actions to connect with God and with our brothers and sisters of faith. Thanks be to God!

Note: I am indebted to JoBailey Wells of Duke Divinity School for the insights into the parable; to Alice Walker, *Sent By Earth*, for the story of the Babemba tribe; and to Dan Glover and Claudia Lavy, *Deepening Your Effectiveness*, for the concept of the discipleship pathway and the purpose of small groups.

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