

More Than a Neighborhood  
John 17:20-26  
1 Corinthians 12: 4-11

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Gospel Lesson: John 17:20-26

*'I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.'*

*'Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.'*

*This is the Word of the Lord.  
Thanks be to God.*

This is what it looks like behind the computers on my desk (holding tangled mass of computer and phone cords.) Maybe this is a familiar scene to you – the back of your TV, your phone docking station, your own office. This tangled web of connection comes to mind when I read this passage from John. *You in me and I in you, they in us, all as one.* Connections – all leading to one another, and coming from one another. You can get lost in Jesus' prayer trying

to keep up with them all. Like me getting lost trying to figure out why my printer isn't working!

Today's Scripture reading, which is all about connecting, is part of Jesus' farewell discourse with his disciples before his arrest and death. He has completed his final instructions and now he prays for them – for their unity and oneness, as he and God are one. This prayer, that we get the extraordinary opportunity to overhear, is not only for the disciples but all the believers after them. Jesus is praying for us today; praying that we will be connected as he and God are connected. It's a prayer that gives us both purpose and hope on this Festival Sunday.

CONNECT has emerged as our theme this year in the life of First Presbyterian Church. It is one of our five core practices that equip us to follow Jesus. We will be exploring various connections through the year – connection to God during Advent; Lent – connecting to self; and in the Spring, connecting to our neighbor. But we begin this fall with a focus on CONNECT to each other.

On one level, we humans seem to be well connected, even more than ever before. These cords remind us of that, too. We can reach people across the world through cell phones and the internet as easily as we can connect to the person in the next cubicle, or next door. Technology has enabled connection like we could never have imagined. And yet. And yet we are finding ourselves increasingly disconnected. Multiple stories about social isolation and the "loneliness epidemic" reveal a different reality. Newsweek at one point

labeled the nation the "*Lonely Planet*" describing our increasing isolation in the U.S<sup>1</sup>.

But we know it's not just isolation we are experiencing; it's also division. Racial division and economic disparity; division due to political ideologies, religions, and countries of origin – we are finding more reason for division than unity. We are connected, yet not.

In the wake of the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, I was moved to pick up some of the writing and reflections of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In the book of his sermons, *Strength to Love*, Dr. King speaks with profound insight to our shared humanity and interconnectedness. One of his observations jumped out at me as I reflected on human division. He writes: "Through your scientific genius you have made the world a neighborhood, but you have failed to employ your moral and spiritual genius to make it a brotherhood."<sup>2</sup>

King wrote this in the *early 1960s*. *You have made the world a neighborhood through your scientific genius, but you have failed to make it a brotherhood*. Today, almost 60 years later, the kinship that Martin Luther King pointed to, and the unity that Jesus prays for before his own death, seems still out of reach.

I appreciate Dr. King's analogy of neighborhood and brotherhood. His contrast between the two stretches us. It raises the bar for relationships. When I think of 1960s neighborhoods, which were the context for Dr. King's writing,

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.newsweek.com/lonely-planet-isolation-increases-us-78647>

<sup>2</sup> (Martin Luther King, *Strength to Love*), 138.

I think of pretty great places, places where neighbors cared for one another, watched out for each other's kids; they knew about each other's lives and were there for each other. My own house growing up was the place where all my brothers' friends came to borrow crutches after their latest great adventure, adventures which quite often resulted in sprains and breaks of varying degrees. Neighborhoods *can* be pretty great. But it is from this idyllic image that Dr. King raises the bar, stretching us to imagine beyond a neighborhood to brotherhood, kinship.

The kinship relationship is deeper. It's a oneness. And this is the relationship that Jesus describes as he prays for us in today's lesson. *Dear Father, the glory you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be completely one* (v. 22). Like these cords, this unity is interconnected, it's a reciprocal relationship of give and receive, that doesn't seem to have a beginning or an ending. And it feels intimate. *As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.* As we discussed this passage in the Wednesday Bible study this week, the intimacy of this relationship stood out. One participant remarked, "it's like they are so close they are touching." Yes. Talk about connection! And *we* are invited to join in *this* relationship.

Relationships are not easy. Like the connections behind my computer, they can be messy - tangled, overwhelming, and frustrating. I try to cover up these connections. They seem unsightly at times. Or, I try to ignore them, not wanting to be bothered by the complications. Similarly, much of our modern

life also hides our essential, *human* connections – our busyness, our self-sufficiency, our need for control, our fears; or our just not wanting to be bothered.

But Jesus prays for more. And the good news is that we are equipped for more! In Paul's letter to the Corinthians that Mike read, we hear that we are equipped for this oneness, each with different gifts to share with one another: "a variety of gifts but the same Spirit" (1 Cor. 4:12) Our unity is a gift of God's grace, not something that we can achieve on our own. By God's grace we carry this capacity for unity in us. Sometimes hidden, but always there.

My friends, hear that good news. We were *created* for this deep connection. That should at least give us hope. Despite the divisions in the world, despite our capacity to hurt one another and alienate the stranger, we have the capacity for more. We are wired that way. And Jesus prayer, in addition to giving us hope, also teaches us that this deep connection gives us purpose.

Notice that each time Jesus prays that we be one, he adds the reason for this unity: "so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (v.23b) It is through our connections, through our relationships, that God's love is revealed to the world, and to each of us. God chose to reveal God's transformative love through relationships as intimate and reciprocal as that of Jesus and God.

With so many natural disasters happening right now in the world, it is difficult to see good news; but in these catastrophes we do see the reciprocal

relationships that reveal God's sustaining love for us, a love that not even death and destruction can take from us. On our screens we have viewed image after image in Texas of neighbor helping neighbor – people who speak different languages, are of different skin color, socio-economic status. Unlikely relationships carrying one another, holding each other, lifting one another up, literally and figuratively.

I watched one woman floating in a boat on her street where large, beautiful homes sat in water up to their second story, describe how life-altering this has been. Now she has become a recipient in this reciprocal kinship. "We were always cleaning out drawers, bagging clothes, bringing them to donation centers," she explains. "We were always the ones giving." (Her observation hits close to home as we buckle in this building under the weight of similar donations in preparation for our rummage sale.) She recalls her own days of sorting excess and extra; and now, she observes, it is her family receiving. *They in me and us in them.*

We need each other. And we need more than a neighborhood. We need these encounters of oneness that reveal God's love. Because in that kinship, we are all changed; closer to God's image.

This kind of change happens when you tutor a disadvantaged child, giving them a chance out of the relentless cycle of poverty, but you come away with lessons in perseverance and character.

It happens when you visit a shut-in and provide a vital connection to community, then you leave realizing it was that shut-in's companionship that you needed.

It happens when you teach the stories of God's people in Sunday school or youth group, and your *own* faith grows.

And it happens when you walk with another in their darkest days that you experience the light of God's compassion and find you've become more compassionate yourself.

So keep praying, Jesus. Keep praying that we would be one. Because in that unity, we discover God's love, and in these deep connections of kinship we become fully who God created us to be; one with God, one in Christ, one with each other – so that the love of God in Jesus Christ might be revealed to the world. May it be so.