

Only Connect

John 17: 10-26

World Communion Sunday/ 5th October 2008

At the beginning of E. M. Foster's (1879-1970) novel, *Howard's End* (1910), we find two simple words: "Only connect." So simple, yet they capture a vast world of meaning and purpose. Kind of says it all, doesn't it? Why we're here in church, in faith, in life.

I usually run away from the word "religious" and generally don't like to be labeled as such. But the etymology of the word "religion" means precisely this: to connect. *Re-ligare*, from the Latin, means "to bind back to something," or simply "connect." Think of a ligament, a fibrous tissue that connects bone to bone or the way orthodontists use ligatures to connect wire braces to realign teeth. It's the same idea. All religions emerge as a way to help people connect with the divine, the Mystery, the Holy.

Jesus never used the word "religion" (in fact, you won't find it anywhere in the Bible). Yet his ministry was all about helping people reconnect with themselves, to see the inherent worth and value within; to connect with others, to see the image of God that dwells in our neighbor known in community, fellowship; to connect with God, to strengthen our ties with the One who called us into existence, who loves us, who tells us we need not feel alone in the cosmos.

When I hear Jesus' "private" prayer in John 17, known as the Great Priestly prayer, because here Jesus is being a priest or mediator between all of us and God, I hear Jesus' desire that we connect with ourselves, with neighbor, with God, in a whole new way. He uses his own connection, his relationship with God as the model. Just as I and the Father are one – *connected, plugged in, together* – so he hopes the same for all of us. "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.”

There’s an old hymn that begins with the words, “Blest be the ties that bind our hearts in Christian love, the fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above.” Throughout my sabbatical and since then, I’ve been doing a lot of thinking and reading, praying, talking, and listening to folks about the things that tie or bind us together. What strengthens our ties with God? What hinders them?

Only connect. On this World Communion Sunday we know we can’t go it alone. We’re all in this together, this thing called faith or life. We’re all part of the whole. As Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968) knew, we’re all part of a vast matrix, a web of interconnectivity. You’re not safe until everyone is safe. I can’t be who I am meant to be unless you are who you are meant to be.¹ We’re all connected – but our links are tenuous, even fragile. No one can stand apart. In the world of the internet we’re all wired together. When the rich and powerful are selfish, the poor and powerless feel the pain. When the poor and powerless are held captive, so are the rich and powerful. Wall Street is Main Street and Main Street is Wall Street. It’s difficult to separate them. We’re all in this financial meltdown together, whether we have money in the market or not. The anxiety is real for the rich and poor and everyone in between. But we’ll get through it together. We don’t have any other choice. We’re all connected, even with people we don’t think we have anything in common with – they need us and we need them.

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., from his sermon “The Man Who Was a Fool,” *The Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 70: “In a real sense, all life is interrelated. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you’re ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality.” .

That's a gospel message if I ever heard one, especially on World Communion Sunday, as we claim our connection with Christians near and far, as we consider the global dimension of the church of Jesus Christ. Today we are asked to remember the world and to travel around the globe in our imaginations.

In 1867, Mark Twain wrote an account of a trip he made with wealthy Americans, part of the Grand Tour to Europe and the Holy Land. The journey began in Brooklyn, New York. He called the book *The Innocents Abroad, Or the New Pilgrims' Progress*. Throughout the book he explores the question whether travel is "broadening" or "narrowing," meaning does it verify prejudices or reinforce stereotypes. For the most part, Twain affirms the latter given his disdain for "dirt, vermin, poverty, disease, superstition, idleness, exploitation, as well as his scorn for foreign currencies, foreign languages, and foreign garb." But in the end he makes this confession; we see a change of heart. "Travel is fatal to prejudices, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it [travel] on these accounts."² It's a conversion for Twain. When does it happen? It probably happened gradually over the journey, but a decisive moment came one morning as he sat within, as he put it, "the charmed circle" – the privileged circle of his camp – of extremely wealthy Westerners, situated alongside a bereft village of Palestinians, *watching them watch him*.³ Twain's image of himself changed when he was able to imagine them looking at him; his self-perspective changed. We need each other to tell us who we are. We need the stranger, the other, to tell us who we are, that why we must also learn to love them and allow them to love us.

The famous Trappist monk, Thomas Merton (1915-1968), surely one of the leading lights of the twentieth century, had a similar kind of epiphany on the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville, KY. He writes in his journal, March 19, 1958: "Yesterday, in the center of the shopping

² Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad, Or, The New Pilgrims' Progress*, introduction by Jane Jacobs (New York: Modern Library, 2003), xxvi.

³ Insight from Jane Jacob's introduction, xxvi.

district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers.” There’s a plaque in Louisville today which marks the spot. That experience was a turning point in his life. Once we get this, we see how we’re all in this together. We’re all connected.

World Communion Sunday points to the love of Christ that holds us all together, stranger and friend. We are connected to the worldwide witness of the church. When one part suffers, we all suffer; when one part rejoices, we all rejoice. We are linked together by the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit who will meet us here in bread and wine and in one another, a Spirit who will draw us, if we let her, into the presence of God – here, at this Table, only to connect.

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