

Life's Best: Connection

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Genesis 3:1-7, 22-24; 2 Corinthians 5:12-21; Mark 3:13-30

“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.” -- 2 Corinthians 5:18

Some of you doubtless have heard the old joke about the Hindu who walks up to a hot dog vendor and says, “Make me one with everything.” In certain strands of Hindu thought, the goal of the spiritual quest is union with the divine, with Brahman, which is ultimate reality. The person who has “seen the light,” so to speak, realizes that the divisions of material existence are in fact illusory, and that reunion with ultimate reality is possible if we get the false perceptions of difference out of our way. The more we develop spiritually, the clearer our connectedness with everything, including God, becomes.

This idea of union, or better, re-union with the divine is a feature of Christianity, as well. In Eastern Christianity, it has played a more prominent role than in western Christianity, which has focused more on the atoning work of Jesus than on the devotional work of the ordinary person, but the idea has been a part of our faith since its beginning.

When Jesus speaks of his essential unity with the Father, as he often does in the gospel of John, and when, in that same gospel, he speaks of himself as being an essential part of his followers, he’s expressing that same fundamental truth about the relatedness between the one and the all. He says, for example, in the fourteenth chapter of John’s gospel, “On that day” – that is, the arrival of the Holy Spirit -- “you will know that I am in the Father, and you in me, and I in you.” When the Holy Spirit allows us to see it, we recognize that there is a basic connection between us and everything around us. But most of us don’t see that connection.

Many years after Jesus, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels would call our attention to another disconnect, this time in the area of economics. In industrial societies, working people have become alienated from our labor because our labor isn’t used to make shoes for the sake of people who need shoes, but rather for generating capital for the handful of owners of shoe factories. We live with the false consciousness that, on the one hand, if we don’t work for the rich and powerful we’ll starve, and, on the other, that we, too, can become rich and powerful one day. Marx and Engels said neither of these beliefs is true in reality, but only in the false reality that we have allowed our societies to become.

I was at a seminar recently on how to plan for retirement from the United Church and Christ, and the point was made that one of the ways to close a gap between income and expenses in old age is to continue to work past the normal retirement age. The presenter offered this option last, as the option of last resort, because most of us don’t

want to keep working a day longer than we have to. By the time we retire, many of us are sick of our jobs and sick of spending the bulk of our waking lives working for other people. We have become alienated from the work we were put on this earth to do.

Here's the way Genesis describes how our working lives are supposed to be: "The Lord God took the human being and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and to keep it." The Hebrew verb translated "till" is actually the ordinary Hebrew verb meaning "to serve," *'avad*, and the word for human, "*`adam*," is a play on the word for ground, which is *`adamah*. So a translation closer to the sense of the Hebrew would be, "The Lord God took the earthling and put it in the garden of Eden to serve and preserve it."

"To serve and preserve it." That's the way we're meant to relate to the earth; we serve it, it doesn't serve us. The earthling serves, the earthling does not own. The land is owned by its creator who gives it to all living creatures as a gift. This point is made repeatedly in the Bible, and we ignore it. We live as though the earth and all its resources belong to us, to do with as we wish. That is another false consciousness and it is fundamentally unbiblical. The church has tried, largely unsuccessfully, I'd say, to challenge that mindset by reminding us in the opening words of all its historic creeds, that we believe in "one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen." The creeds connect us to our divine parent who is also the almighty creator, and through that creator, to all that is, seen and unseen.

I'm drawing your attention to these emphases on connectedness because this is a sermon about connection as one of life's best practices. This is the second in a series of four sermons about the ways of living that are better than other ways of living. Let me repeat that with a bit of edge in my voice: the ways of living that are better than other ways of living.

For those of you who may sometimes feel that we in the United Church of Christ stand for nothing, can make no distinctions between better or worse ways of living, have no standards, and whose minds are so open that our brains have fallen out, let me reassure that such is not the case. By no means have we abandoned the rich heritage of the Christian faith that equips us for the ministry of reconciliation that Paul says is our calling. That's our text for this morning: "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation."

Let's not bog ourselves down this morning in interminable and fruitless wranglings about our alienation from God – where it came from, what it looks like, what can be done about it, and by whom. Let's accept, however, that the words in our Statement of Faith -- "God seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin" -- apply as much to us as to whomever comes to mind when we reflect on those words. Our enshrinement of private property – that the earth and all its resources belong to us rather than to God, and that it is acceptable for some of us to hoard while many of us suffer want – that state of affairs alone should give us some sense of our estrangement from God.

That's what that sad and lovely story in Genesis that was our first reading is meant to tell us. We are estranged from essential reality and enveloped in various forms of false realities of our own making. And the more we falsify reality, the more estranged and isolated we become.

I said to you last week that this series of sermons sprang generally from a workshop about suicide, and specifically about the way of life of older African American women that stasticially puts them at the lowest risk for suicide in our society. I'm guessing, but it's an educated guess, that one of the components of that way of life for older black women is being connected to the world around them and not simply to isolated parts of it. Partly because of economic necessity, African American women have had to engage with the world in a far more sweeping manner than those of us whose

money and opportunities shield us from much of the world. We allow our privilege to isolate us from many of the world's realities that would help keep us grounded and connected in ways that make life better rather than worse.

I saw this phenomenon at work when I was a dean of students at the most selective university in America. Wealth and privilege, far from making Harvard undergraduates feel secure and competent, often made them feel insecure and frightened of not living up to the high standards that had gotten them to Harvard College in the first place. And the only time I ever worried about a student's safety was when I got the impression that the student was feeling more and more isolated, cut off, not able to connect with other people, not able to see her or his life in its broad and true perspective. That's when I began to worry about suicide, and that's when I would usually walk a student up to the University Health Services for professional help.

College isn't meant to have that effect on people. Growing a sense of isolation in someone is exactly the opposite of what a liberal arts education is for. We go to college not to learn a trade – we need to develop our trade schools and apprenticeships and journeyman programs for that – but to learn of the many ways in which we are connected to the world and the world is connected to us. That's what learning is for.

We learn to discover that we are made up of carbon, nitrogen, hydrogen and all the other stuff that makes up a tree, a tadpole, or a star. We learn to discover that the dark feelings we all sometimes have Abraham Lincoln also had, and that those feelings are called depression and that we can do great things in spite of them. We learn to discover that the so-called welfare state has virtually eliminated poverty as one of the historic scourges of old age, and that as we ourselves grow older, poverty is one of the fears we need not entertain.

Those are the sorts of connections learning helps us make, and those connections are the reason I became a teacher before I became a pastor. Building connections among people, between us and the world around us, and between us and God – that makes life worth living. It makes life endlessly fascinating, endlessly engaging, and if we paid more people to do it, our quality of life would skyrocket and our unemployment rate would plummet.

We are essentially social creatures. We are born into community and we depend on community for our existence and survival. John Donne told us that no one is an island; we are much more like stands of aspen trees, tens of thousands of which may depend on a single vast root system that invisibly links all of those visible trees together. We are a community made up of many smaller communities, whether we are aware of it or not, and those who spend their lives building up those communities improve their own lives as they improve the lives of others. There is such a thing as enlightened self-interest; when we look to the welfare of others properly, we cannot help but help ourselves. It is only when we seek the welfare of others improperly that we get ourselves into trouble. When we stray across that line we enter the world of enabling behavior and co-dependency, and we do no one any good. Every good parent and every good spouse knows that this line exists, however frequently we may fail to respect it.

One of the things that committees on the ministry are on the lookout for in candidates seeking ordination is whether a person is confusing a call from God with an attempt to meet basic psychological and emotional needs through an accepting community. None of us lives with entirely pure motives, of course, but people who go into the ministry because they want to be loved, to be approved of, or to be accepted by others – those are warning signs that there will be trouble ahead for such a person and the churches they serve. There is a wrong way as well as a right way to be in community, and one of the great contributions of psychotherapy is helping us sort out our

true motives from the ostensible ones, which allows us to connect with others appropriately. And that's why one of the hoops our candidates for ministry have to jump through is an extensive psychological evaluation by a facility trained for such evaluations.

One of the lightbulb moments I experienced some years ago was when I realized that one of the main functions of psychotherapy is to help us see how we have made connections between our past lives and our present lives in unhelpful and sometimes destructive ways. Therapy can't change the past, but it can change how we connect ourselves to our pasts, and sorting out the good connections from the bad ones, and helping people build on the good ones can produce astonishing results. Remaining connected to ourselves and the world around us – including and especially God, about which I'll say more in subsequent sermons – is one of life's very best practices.

Let me close now with a story I've told some of you in other settings. It's about being connected to the world in the right way.

Dr. Karl Menninger, of the renowned family of psychiatrists in Kansas, was once asked what he would advise someone who thought they were about to suffer a nervous breakdown. "Lock up your house," Dr. Menninger replied, "go over to the wrong side of the tracks and do something beneficial for someone there." That was the best therapy Menninger could offer to someone who thought they might be losing their grip on reality. Menninger grounded our sense of reality in our connectedness to others.

When we do loving and intelligent things for others we rebuild those connections that are essential for life to be lived at its best. The worst thing we can do to our quality of life as we age is adopt the attitude that it's time to kick back and enjoy our golden years by letting others do for us. There's nothing golden about self-pity or self-indulgence. The only thing that is golden is the thread by which we lovingly bind ourselves to God's creation, which includes other people, and to the God who gives us ourselves as part of that creation. People who live connected to life that way are living their golden years whether they're seventy or seventeen.

The ministry of reconciliation is the closest thing we've ever found to the alchemist's stone that has the power to turn whatever it touches into gold. Live God's reconciling love day in and day out, and you'll be amazed at how life can begin to glow.