

“Connected”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

5-2-21

Based upon Ruth 2:1-13; John 15:1-8

In 2015, U.S. photographer Eric Pickersgill was sitting in a café in Troy, NY when all of a sudden, the family sitting next to him caught his attention. They weren't unusually loud or rude or strangely dressed. They were just utterly disconnected one from another. The father and his two daughters had their phones out. The mother, who either didn't have one or chose not to use it, was staring out the window looking sad and alone, notwithstanding being in the company of her closest family. Every once and a while the dad would share something he saw online, but no one replied. The scene struck Pickersgill as such a sad commentary on the negative affect of technology on our social relationships, that he used that moment as inspiration for a series of photographs he later published called “*Removed*.”¹ The series, which struck such a nerve that it instantly, and ironically, went viral online, depicts what our body language and behavior look like when the phones, which are ubiquitously in most of our hands, are omitted. Here are a few of the shots from the collection, which we are showing with Pickersgill's permission: [3 slides]. I think they illustrate so simply and powerfully how much intimacy we are losing or have already lost in our society in our romantic, familial, and social relationships. Even when we are with each other, increasingly we aren't actually *with* each other. We aren't connected in the way that people used to be.

Pickersgill noticed this years before the pandemic. Now the situation is even worse because of it. Although technology has been a great blessing in some respects, for example, allowing us to worship together now even though we aren't together in the building, and to do business and school from our homes, and has allowed some people to connect with old friends or family across the country they hadn't talked to in a long time, the pandemic has also increased our dependence upon technology exponentially, feeding our addiction, and has decreased our ability to form and nurture meaningful in-person connections. Inside homes, families retreat to their own technology silos. Outside of homes, after more than a year of social distancing, many of us now look at each other more as possible sources of contagion than friendship. This doesn't bode well for our prospects of being able to re-enter society post-pandemic with an improved sense of intimacy and connection. As we have already seen, some people are diving back into social settings eagerly, but also often with a careless disregard for how their actions may affect others in these days before we reach herd immunity; while others have grown so frightened in the past year that they are wondering if they will ever feel safe meeting with others again. The rest of us are in the middle, desperate to be with people again, but really out of practice for how to do so. Case in point, this week I went to one of my son's club meetings- our first in person in over a year. It was outside and safe, and the kids interacted pretty well. But a photo of the parents would have fit right into Pickersgill's collection. We sat for an hour, separated from each other looking at our phones, not talking to each other. If building connections was not just a social skill but a muscle, then it was painfully clear that ours had gone to flab in the past year and a half.

¹ See Eric Pickersgill Photography at <https://www.ericpickersgill.com/removed.social/about>. The images shown in worship: “*Angie and me*,” “*Wendy, Brian, Hunter, and Harper*,” and “*Aaron & Scott*,” © Eric Pickersgill, are attached at the end of this document with Eric Pickersgill's permission.

One thing everyone agrees on, however, which the pandemic has made obvious, is that human beings, by nature, are social creatures. Anthropologists have known this for years. They figured out that the reason the human brain evolved to be so disproportionately large compared to our body size is that we needed all that brain power to foster social relationships to survive.² Without strong interpersonal connections, children are irreparably damaged, and people of all ages suffer all kinds of physical as well as emotional problems. One study found that loneliness can have the same effects on your health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day!³ Now the epidemic of loneliness that started with technological innovations in the past few decades, and grew as more and more people, prompted by our materialistic world, abandoned social relationships in the name of getting ahead at work, has become its own pandemic during the pandemic. Something needs to change.

The first step, according to clinical social psychologist and neuroscientist Matthew Lieberman, is to recognize just how critical social connections are to our physical, emotional, and mental well-being.⁴ Since people have been foregoing connection not just because of phone addiction, but also in the pursuit of greater wealth, incorrectly assuming that money will be able to buy them happiness, Lieberman cites the work of economists who have put a price tag on our relationships to convey just how vital they are. I'm not quite sure how they were able to quantify these things, but they said if you volunteer at least once a week, the increase in your happiness is like moving from a yearly income of \$20,000 to \$75,000. If you have a friend you see on most days, it's like earning \$100,000. Seeing your neighbors on a regular basis gets you \$60,000. On the other hand, when critical social ties are broken, such as in the case of divorce, it's like suffering a \$90,000 per year decrease in income. After a year and a half of not getting to be with family, friends, neighbors and more, that puts all of us very much in the hole in this economy of relationships.⁵

Ruth and Naomi were in a similar kind of hole at the start of our Old Testament lesson today, not because of divorce, but because of death. Each of them had lost their husbands, who not only provided companionship in those days, but also their only real means of security. Naomi's deficit was greater than Ruth's however, because she had not only lost her husband, but also her two sons, one of whom had been Ruth's husband, and the other the husband of another Moabite woman named Orpah. With three critical losses so close together, Naomi was about as close to emotionally and spiritually bankrupt as you can get. But Ruth wasn't ready to give up. Clinging to the one meaningful relationship she had left, she pledged to stay with Naomi, to worship her God, and to follow her wherever she went. Naomi was doubtful about the wisdom of doing this instead of Ruth going back to her parents' house. But with this little bit of relational capital between them, they set out to return to Naomi's kin in Israel, with the hope that someone might take them in.

² See Esfahani Smith, Emily, "Social Connection Makes a Better Brain," THE ATLANTIC, Oct. 29, 2013.

³ "Reconnecting After Social Distancing," Urgent Team Family of Urgent Care & Walk in Centers, (citing a study in the journal *Perspectives in Psychological Science*). Accessed April 27, 2021 from <https://www.urgentteam.com/healthy-living-tips-reconnecting-after-social-distancing>.

⁴ *Ibid*, *Social Connection Makes a Better Brain*, citing Lieberman's book Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect.

⁵ *Ibid*.

Once they are back in her home territory, the story shows them step by step increasing the connections they had with others as a means of survival. First, they go to the area where Naomi used to live. Although she was much changed after 10 years away in Moab, the people there still recognized her and welcomed her into the neighborhood; and because she was with Naomi, they also welcomed Ruth, who otherwise might have been rejected as a foreigner. Then, when Ruth went to glean grain from some family fields, which the poor, by law, were allowed to do, they added another connection in the form of Boaz, the field's owner. A distant relative of Naomi's, he noticed Ruth as a stranger, and asked after her. When he learned of her situation, he told her how to get what she needed, and puts out the word that he was her protector so she would be able to work unmolested. If we had kept reading the story, we then would have seen Ruth move from stranger protégée to having greater intimacy in her relationship with Boaz. We would have watched as Boaz then took steps not just to marry her and make her a part of his family, but by properly appealing to the community to do so, also making her official in their eyes. By the end of the story, Ruth has a husband, her beloved mother-in-law, a new community to call her own, and a baby. She also has God because the community saw God in all of these blessings. Basically, she hits the jackpot in terms of connectedness— and through her we do too, in a way, because her child becomes one of the ancestors of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

“I am the vine, and you are the branches” Jesus says in our New Testament text today, speaking to his disciples about another kind of connectedness. “Apart from me you can do nothing.” In other words, Jesus is our source of spiritual strength, which enables us to grow and thrive. When we cling to him as Ruth clung to Naomi, we have what we need to “bear fruit,” that is to live as the people God made us to be. If we get disconnected, however, we do not have it in ourselves to be fruitful in the same way and can wither. But this critical relationship between us and Jesus is not just a vertical one. As any vineyard owner can show you, the branches on the vine are not like individual, free-standing fruit trees. They are twisted and woven together. Each branch is fed by the same vine, but they are strengthened by each other as well, and the fruit they produce appears communal because the branches are all entwined together.

This is how our faith calls us to live, connected to the vine and entwined together. Did you know the word “religion,” *religare* in the Latin, means “to tie or bind together?” As one of Fred Roger's favorite spiritual gurus, Bo Lozoff, put it, religion in essence is the practice of nurturing two forms of connectedness, what he called “Communion and Community.”⁶ Communion is about connecting with our individual selves to God and God's truth. Community is about connecting to others. If we pursue community without communion, we risk becoming burned out, lonely, and lost constantly meeting the needs of others without feeding ourselves. If we have Communion without community, we risk becoming self-absorbed and selfish in our faith— or “unfruitful” in the imagery of John 15th. We need both. As religious people, we need to bind ourselves to Christ, to dedicate our lives to having Communion with him in Spirit and truth, and to bind ourselves to one another as well, so that we can be healthy and fruitful together.

⁶ Lozoff, Bo, Deep & Simple: a spiritual path for modern times (Durham: Human Kindness Foundation, 1999), 94-95.

It has been a long time since we all did this together, a long time since we have flexed our social muscles so that our minds and hearts can be fed by something other than our screens. As a result, psychologists are predicting that re-entry is going to feel a bit awkward. WASHINGTON POST report Lisa Bonos suggested in an article this week that our new lives might resemble a middle school dance. “We’re eager to be with others, but don’t know quite how to act. And our dance moves have aged terribly,” she observed.⁷ Remembering middle school dances well, I hope it won’t be that bad. But it is complicated. We are not all in the same place in terms of risk and how we observe it. The time is coming soon, however, when ready or not, we will resume in-person worship and other church activities, so now is the time for us to begin to think about changing our routines with the intention of reconnecting. If you have not felt rooted in the vine in a while, what needs to change in your life to reestablish that communion? If you have not felt connected in community, what could you do, within your comfort level for risk, to begin working out that social relations muscle which has grown flabby for so many of us?

Speaking about re-entry, social worker Angela Koreth observed, “It’s normal to be nervous or even feel guilty about reconnecting. Assimilating back into society is like getting into a pool, you either dip your toe into the shallow end or you dive head first into the deep end.”⁸ I don’t know whether you are the kind of person who prefers to get your toes wet first or just dive in, but either way, in order to help you and all of us reconnect, this summer at Prince of Peace we are going to offer kiddy pools of sorts to make the transition easier for everyone by launching a new small group ministry called *Connections*. You may be thinking, why would a small church like POP even need small groups. Doesn’t everyone know everyone else already? But you would be surprised. Even in small churches there can be people who feel lonely or disconnected, and people who know each other superficially but not well. Small groups allow for greater ease of conversation, and greater relational intimacy than all-church gatherings. They mix people up in interesting ways and allow for deeper connections.

Accordingly, this summer, everyone who is already on our rolls, and anyone else who has been worshipping virtually who wants to participate and notifies the church, is going to be assigned to a small group. Each group will meet twice this summer, the first time in June or July for fellowship and fun, to begin to build connections and remember what it is like to talk to people in the flesh instead of just see them in boxes on our screens. The second time in August will be for a little vesper prayer service up by the labyrinth prepared by Dottie LaPenta. Think of these groups like bridges— between virtual church and in-person church, to help us practice and move through our anxieties and awkwardness— and as the means by which we can have our loneliness and self-centeredness pruned off, and our communion with the vine and our connectedness with each other strengthened. No one is going to be forced to participate. But I hope you all will, even if you consider yourself shy or introverted or new to POP, because we all need to increase our relational capital after everything we have been through. The groups will meet in ways that are safe, and regardless of whether worship is taking place in person in the sanctuary. With the Spirit’s help, I hope and pray that they will continue meeting at least quarterly after the summer, to allow people to have smaller communities within the larger one,

⁷ Bonos, Lisa, “*Not Sick, Just Ill at Ease*,” THE WASHINGTON POST, Section C, April 27, 2021.

⁸ As quoted in O’Neill, John J., “*Reconnecting After COVID-19*,” Psychology Today, Oct. 14, 2020; accessed April 27, 2021 from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/mind-matters-menninger/202010/reconnecting-after-covid-19>

which providing spiritual and emotional support along the way.

God made us to be connected in community, not to be isolated from intimacy by either viruses or technology. Trust and believe that by the grace of God in Jesus Christ you are not alone, and then join me in experiencing the joy of that good news this summer, as we prioritize making and nurturing connections our pathway to reentry and renewal and fruitfulness. Amen.

Images in worship from photographer Eric Pickersgill's piece, "Removed."

© Eric Pickersgill, Used with permission

