



Sermon, July 2, 2017
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Coburg and Junction City United Methodist Churches

“Connecting with Others”

John 15:12-17 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

12 “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. **13** No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. **14** You are my friends if you do what I command you. **15** I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. **16** You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. **17** I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Have you ever gone down to one of your favorite stores only to find a “Going out of business” sign posted? It’s a great time to get a bargain, but what happens after that? Someone once encountered the following sign across the window of one establishment that was closing its doors: “Going out of business. Forgot what our business was.”

As tragic as that may sound, it was certainly an honest self-appraisal. What about us as a church? What is our business? Where are we going? What is our purpose for being here in Coburg/Junction City? A church without a purpose is a little like Alice in the fairy tale Alice in Wonderland. In a conversation with the Cheshire Cat, Alice asked, “Would you tell me please, which way I ought to go from here?” “That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the cat. “I don’t much care where,” said Alice. “Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the cat.

It is vitally important to know where we are going as a church, just as it is important for us to know that about our individual lives. The main purpose of the local Church, according to the Discipline, is “making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” I have always thought it better and more Biblically and Spiritually correct to say “to form disciples...” in acknowledgement of the long tradition in the

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Christian community of spiritual formation. In this season following Pentecost, having reflected last week upon the work of the Trinity, it is important to note that Jesus bestows the gift of the Holy Spirit to continue the work he began in the flesh.

As human beings, we possess the potential for consciousness of a quality of life infused with a sense of purpose, meaning and significance. Our hearts, souls and minds are created to incline us toward a life that is compassionate, passionate, open to and caring of others, which embraces spiritual values and moral insight. All of this exists as a potential life - the capacity and possibilities are a part of human consciousness, but as potentials these qualities of life must be taught and cultivated. The church functions, then, as that place where human capacities such as kindness, love, mercy, generosity, justice and compassion are brought out from latency to full expression in persons.

Our work here in the church is to participate with God in the continual unfolding and development of the universe. We are a vital and significant part of this process and of the destiny of the universe, particularly in this very small part of it. Human consciousness, creativity and freedom are not accidents and aberrations from a well-ordered universe – they are part and parcel of its ebb and flow. Thus we must take our task very seriously and work carefully to align ourselves with the movement and course of this great purpose and intention of our existence. That is the essence and foundation of any disciple-making or formation.

This work of aligning our lives with God’s great purpose and intention for the world is the essence of religion. But let’s pause for a moment to look at what the word “religion” actually means. It is actually an interesting word with a long history, but its Latin roots will suffice. It is made up of two smaller words, *re-*, which means to restore or go back to an earlier condition, and *ligiô*, from *ligâre*, which means to bind. *Ligâre* is related to words such as ligament, which binds muscles to bones, and lignin, the substance in plants that binds cells together. Thus, religion has to do with binding back together what has come unraveled. As the fabric of our world becomes more and more frayed, surely something is needed to

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repair its tears and mend its breaches (or breeches if you will.) That is the proper place for religion.

Religion is about repairing what is broken:

- a. People are broken
- b. Human society is broken

The formation and rebinding work of religion happens person to person. Do you recall that Bantu phrase I quoted last week, which summarizes the African philosophy of Ubuntu – “people become people through people?” The church exists as that gathering of people whose sole purpose is to rebind and rebuild broken people and a broken world.

In order for this to happen, there needs to be a balance between the movement inward and the movement outward. There needs to be a constant inward and outward rhythm of movement within the life of the church: from the inwardness of prayer and self-examination to loving fellowship and concern for one another; from actively inviting people into the activities of the church to going on mission trips and building homes for others; from studying in classes and support groups to teaching and working in jobs outside of church; from raising money for our local budget to raising funds for projects and ministries across the globe. There is no division of local versus global, it is always both/and. All of it united in this singular focus upon making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

What the church provides is the laboratory wherein the gold of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is refined in the crucible of human hearts. This refining occurs in small groups, in working together, in getting to know one another, in caring for one another. This is the second part of our equation for forming disciples of Jesus Christ: Connecting with others. We Connect with God, and we Connect with others.

In one of her columns, the late Erma Bombeck had this to say about the vital importance of connecting with one another:

It was one of those days when I wanted my own apartment – unlisted.

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My son was telling me, in complete detail, about a movie he had just seen, punctuated by 3,000 “you knows?” My teeth were falling asleep. There were three phone calls – strike that – three monologues that could have been answered by a recording. I fought the urge to say, “It’s been nice listening to you.” And later, in the cab from home to the airport, I got another assault on my ear, this time by a cabdriver rambling on about his son in college.

At least there were thirty whole beautiful minutes before my plane took off – time for me to be alone with my thoughts, to open a book and let my mind wander.

A voice next to me belonging to an elderly woman said, “I’ll bet it’s cold in Chicago.”

Stone-faced, I replied, “It’s likely.”

“I haven’t been to Chicago in nearly three years,” she persisted. “My son lives there.”

“That’s nice,” I said, my eyes intent on my book.

“My husband’s body is on this plane. We’ve been married 53 years. I don’t drive, you know, and when he died a nun drove me home from the hospital. We aren’t even Catholic. The funeral director let me come to the airport with him.”

I don’t think I have ever detested myself more than I did at that moment. Another human being was screaming to be heard, and, in desperation, had turned to a cold stranger who was more interested in a novel than in the real-life drama at her elbow. She needed no advice, money, assistance or expertise – all she needed was someone to listen.

She talked numbly and steadily until we boarded the plane, then found her seat in the other section. As I hung up my coat, I heard her plaintive voice say to her seat companion, “I’ll bet it’s cold in Chicago.”

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I prayed, “Please, God, let *her* listen.”¹

It’s all about listening to God and listening to one another, discovering that God often speaks to our hearts as we listen to one another. This is how disciples are formed by the Holy Spirit: through each of us, person to person, open heart to open heart. This is how we become a *caring community of Christians where we accept, renew and change lives by sharing God’s love in ways that make a difference in our world*. If we keep to this path, we will never have to hang up a sign that says, “Going out of business. Forgot what our business was.”

¹ Erma Bombeck, “Please, Listen!” Chicago Sun Times (Feb. 26, 1977).