

“Two Sons, One Party”

Luke 15:11-32

4th Sunday in Lent

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How many of you brought your smartphone with you today?
Now please don't be embarrassed...have any of you forgotten to silence it?

This is not a public service announcement.

I do want you to think about your smartphone, if you have one, as we start this sermon.

If you have a smart phone with you, and if it's silent right now...how long will it be, do you think, before you CHECK IT after worship?

Will you check it while you're still in your pew?
Will you wait until after you've greeted people nearby?
Will you wait until you get to your car?
Will you wait until get home from church?

Or is all that wishful thinking, because there are any number of you who have your phone in your hand and you are planning to discreetly check your phone a few times during today's sermon?

Don't answer that...

Please know that these questions come with NO JUDGMENT whatsoever. My smartphone is sitting in the sacristy right now, and when I return to the sacristy after worship, I will check it to make sure no new texts have arrived, no new voicemails have come in...

I tell myself that I do this because it's my job, and who knows, someone on staff may need to reach me, but they're in another part of the building, so sending a text is the easiest way to communicate—doesn't happen often on a Sunday morning, but it happens, which means it's a good thing that I've got my phone nearby...so I need to check my phone right after worship, right?

How often do I REALLY need to check it?
How often do you really need to check yours?

What does it mean to be connected in our world today?

THAT'S the question I want us to explore this morning.

What does it mean to be connected?

It is, perhaps, one of THE most important questions for our day.
As one recent article in *The New York Times* put it:

“America is suffering an epidemic of loneliness.

“According to a recent large-scale survey from the health care provider Cigna, most Americans suffer from strong feelings of loneliness and a lack of significance in their relationships. Nearly half say they sometimes or always feel alone or “left out.” Thirteen percent of Americans say that *zero* people know them well.”¹

In an age where more people out there are lonelier than ever, what does it mean to be connected?

A few years ago, I sat down at a restaurant, and there's a family of four at a nearby table. Father, mother, daughter, son.

What is that family doing?
Are they talking with each other?
Laughing? Arguing?

No, no...you know what they're doing.
All of them have their heads buried in their phones as each of them is responding to some text or playing some game!

Quality family time in the second decade of the 21st century, right?

Now it's easy to sit in judgment of that family.

¹ Arthur C. Brooks, “How Loneliness Is Tearing America Apart,” *The New York Times*, November 23, 2018.

But I read an article a while back that described a study about smartphones.

This study looked at the area of the brain that was energized by the sound that our smartphones make—and surprisingly, it was NOT the part of the brain that has to do with addiction...

Do you know what part of the brain gets activated by the sound of a smartphone?

The part of the brain that has to do with LOVE...²

What does it mean to be connected?

This is not a modern question.
It's an age-old question.

And it's one of the questions behind our parable for today.

Jesus begins: "There was a man who had two sons."

Immediately, we have connections.
Connections that transcends geography and gender, race and culture, class and time.

And then...according to Jesus—disconnection:

"The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.'"

The younger son wasn't just being GREEDY. It was the equivalent of the younger son telling his father, "Dad, I really wish you were dead!"

And you know how this story goes.

² "You Love Your iPhone. Literally.", by Martin Lindstrom, *The New York Times*, September 30, 2011.

Younger son disappears, father thinks he's lost forever, but after the younger child has wasted his father's money, he begins to go hungry. And so, the younger son decides to humble himself and he returns home.

Now what's he looking for when he comes home?
Food, yes, most definitely a way to get food.

But I think at a deeper level, what that younger child is truly hungry for...
is connection.

Do you know anything about this? About what it's like to be in the same family with someone, to love someone, to grow up with someone...and even though you're in the same family, you still hunger for a deeper, more authentic connection?

A number of years ago, Jean Jeffery Gietzen wrote a brief essay reminiscing about her father.

She said that when she was young, she was very close to her father. The time she experienced this closeness the most was when they would have big family gatherings, with all the aunts and uncles and cousins.

At some point, someone would pull out the old record player and put on polka records, and the family would dance.

Eventually, someone would put on the "Beer Barrel Polka,"
and when the music of the "Beer Barrel Polka" played,
her father would come up to her, tap her on the shoulder,
and say, "I believe this is our dance."

And Jean would dance with her father.

One time, though, when she was a teenager and in a mood,
the Beer Barrel Polka began to play,
and her father tapped her on the shoulder and said,
"I believe this is our dance"—

And she snapped back at him, "*Don't touch me! Leave me alone!*"

There were people in Jesus' day who did not want to be connected with other people in Jesus' day.

Chapter 15 of Luke's Gospel begins like this:

“Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”

In other words, some people did not like the people about whom Jesus was saying, “I have a connection with these people!”

And so do you—that's what Jesus was telling the Pharisees and the scribes. **You have a connection with these people too.**

All of which makes me wonder about the Church.
Our church, perhaps...any church, really...

I wonder if one of the greatest gifts that the Church can give to the world is to show the world what it means to be connected...not connected as Democrats, not connected as Republicans, not connected as people who live in the “05”, not connected as people who are a part of Gower...but connected as children of God.

What if the gift that the Church can give to the world
is to show the world that being a child of God
is our first identity and our most common connection.

It raises some difficult questions, right?
As children of God,
what does it mean to be connected to one another in here—
and to our neighbors out there?

What does it mean, for example, to be connected to the migrants who keep running to our country, often to flee gang violence at home?

Or to be connection refugees across the ocean, who are fleeing violence in the homelands at the greatest numbers since WWII?

Or to connect to people right here in Greenville who are being displaced from their homes because of our city's growing economy...what does it look like to keep connection with those who are being forced to move out of their homes because the value of housing in our city keeps going up?

Or to connect with your brothers and sisters in Christ, right here in our own growing, politically purple church?

Mark Chaves, a Duke University sociologist who studies religion, recently wrote a book entitled *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*.

No surprise, "his research shows that most Christians gravitate toward bigger churches—not just the stereotypical megachurches but larger churches in mainline Protestant denominations as well."

Why larger churches?

"For some, the reason for joining has more to do with not feeling pressured to participate. 'We can see that clearly part of the attraction of big churches for some people is exactly that people don't have to get involved beyond going to the show on Sunday,' Chaves said.

'It's easier to free-ride in a bigger church than a smaller church.'"⁴

It's easy to look at CONNECTION as something WE CHOOSE to do.

Think Facebook...we choose our connections on Facebook.

We choose whose invitation we accept, whether to friend or defriend someone else...it's all our choice. We are in control of the connections.

But I'm not so sure that's what it means to be Christ's disciple.
What if being a disciple of Jesus doesn't begin with our choices?

⁴ Eileen E. Flynn, "In booming Austin, Texas, churches struggle to keep pace with the city's growth," in Faith & Leadership, found at https://www.faithandleadership.com/booming-austin-texas-churches-struggle-keep-pace-citys-growth?utm_source=FL_newsletter&utm_medium=content&utm_campaign=FL_topstory&fbclid=IwAR3Uk1dUs_boM4rkMTI8y0LXIW0Hlx8a50V5A0e_Phen3Tp2KIvd2N5QX4s.

What if the very reason we're here today is about God CHOOSING US?
Or even more to the point, about God calling us?

What if—when it comes to connection—the deeper, more important question is simply this:

By choosing me to a disciple of Jesus, what is God CALLING me to do?

What if being a member of Westminster is about God calling us, INVITING us into a world of connections that may not be convenient for us and we would never dream up on our own, but that God really wants for us to have?

My colleague Karl Travis is the former pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Ft. Worth.

Karl recently shared the story of the time that he met Margot Kidder.

Margot Kidder, you'll recall, was the actress who played Lois Lane in the 1978 Superman movie. She died last year, at the age of 69, and her life—very sadly—was not a Hollywood fairy tale.

Karl writes:

“Kidder’s post-Superman days were painful ones. She suffered from bipolar disorder and in 1996 found herself homeless, living on the Los Angeles streets.

“Years later, I was in a small group invited to hear her story. Kidder told about living out of doors. She recalled being disoriented one day, disheveled, in a pronounced manic state, stranded in the middle of a busy intersection.

“A homeless man – I think his name was Charlie – carefully crossed the busy traffic to reach her and to escort her to the safety of the curb. He asked her name, asked where she was going, asked how long it had been since she had eaten.

“This Good Samaritan then took her to an underpass where he introduced her to the others, dozens of people also experiencing homelessness. That night, he made sure that she had a cardboard box to protect her from the elements. In the morning, he went to McDonalds to pick up yesterday’s leftovers. He put the day-

old fast food in a rusty grocery cart and rolled it back to the tent city, charging people what they could afford to pay.

“He fed Margot Kidder for free. She had no money.

“Kidder camped beneath that underpass for several days before remembering enough of her life and identity to seek help. Then, she made her way into the mental health system.

After Kidder was done with her remarks, Karl Travis says he waited for the right moment, and then introduced himself:

“I’m a minister,” he said to her.

“Will you please tell me about God?”

“She offered that she wasn’t a particularly religious person. Like so many people asked about God, she heard me asking instead about religion...

Church people, Kidder thought, are so often judgmental...

Still, Charlie had rescued and cared for her.

“She reflected on how, if God exists, she expected that God might look something like Charlie, might act like Charlie. He had been for her security in a time of danger, certainty in a time of disorientation. Yes, she said, this is how God would behave.”⁵

What if being connected—in our day and age, for every person in this room—means something as simple **as showing the world how God would behave...**

I say “something as simple”—but it’s not that simple, is it?

According to Jesus, we don’t follow a God who points a finger at the prodigal.

⁵ As told by the Rev. Karl Travis in a recent Facebook post.

We follow a God who throws parties for the prodigal.
And it's the party in this parable that upends the older brother's world!

The very idea that his dad would throw a party for his younger brother makes him so angry, he wants to SEVER his connections with them both!

“Listen!” he says to his father. “For all these years I have been working like a slave for you and I have never disobeyed your command.... But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!”

And do you recall what the father says?

“Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

Not this son of mine was dead and is now alive...but this brother of yours.

Do you see what's happening here?
The older brother wants to do the same thing his younger brother did!
He wants to SEVER the connection.

But his father won't let him do it.

In other words, God's throwing a party, but God isn't going to throw that party on OUR TERMS. God's throwing a party on God's terms. And one of those terms is that when it comes to God's children...no matter who they are or what they've done...God is determined to get God's children connected again!

So the parable ends with the father standing outside with his older child, asking that child to please, please join the party.

Have you ever felt like that older brother?
Standing outside, not wanting to join the party, but you know God wants you to join the party?

Well, let me ask you...what do you think the older son does?
Jesus doesn't tell us how this parable ends.
How do you think it ends?

Once when I was teaching a class on this parable, I asked folks to write down how they think the parable ends.

Some said that the older brother swallowed his pride and joined the party.
Others said he turned and walked away.

One person said that the father got fed up with both of his boys, and gave the rest of the inheritance money to Habitat for Humanity.

It's a fun question, what the older brother would do.
It's not the most important question.

The most important question is what you and I will do because God has chosen us and claimed us and called us to be God's head and hands and heart in this world.

In this city, in this church, in our very own FAMILIES...there are CONNECTIONS that God wants us to make, to mend, to rebuild, to strengthen, to forge...and it's not going to be easy.

Rebuilding a connection might mean swallowing our pride and forgiving someone close to us, even if they don't admit they were wrong.

Connecting might mean stepping outside our comfort zone, and working to establish relationships with people who don't think like us, or live like us, or have the same education as us...but they don't live too far from us.

Not easy to do...but here's the thing.
According to Jesus, these are the places where God is throwing God's party.

What do you think you will do?
Will you go to the party?

I'll make you a deal.

I'll say yes to the party
if you'll say yes to the party.

Amen.