

“Intertwined”
John 15:1-5
World Communion Sunday

September 30, 2022
Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

Our number one goal for this year—
and perhaps for the years to come—
is connection.

Why connection?
You know why.

Because when the pandemic hit Westminster, like every other church, we all began to feel DISCONNECTED—from church, from one another, maybe even from our faith.

So if there’s anything I hope for with our congregation in the months to come, it’s that each of you, in both familiar ways and in new ways, will once again feel connected.

Connected to one another.
Connected to Westminster.
Connected to our neighbors.
Connected to the God we know in Jesus Christ.

Of course, the concept is not a new one.
Connection—
how we are connected to each other in here,
and how we are serving and loving our neighbors,
connected to God’s children out there—it’s not a new idea.

It’s an old idea.
Jesus spoke about connection.

On the last night of his life, he said to his disciples:

“I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”

What a beautiful image.

Christ is the vine, and we are the branches.

To be part of God’s church is, by definition, to be connected.

Have you ever considered how powerful connection can be?

It’s no small thing...

The late, great preacher Fred Craddock once told about the time he was stranded in Canada by a surprise snowstorm. Everything shut down, no cars on the road, but the bus depot was open. The buses weren’t going anywhere, but there was a café at the depot, so Dr. Craddock trudged through the snow to the depot.

And it appeared, upon opening the door, that—no surprise—every other traveler had the same idea for how to get food and how to get warm.

The café was crowded.

Dr. Craddock sat down in a booth and a man in a greasy apron came over.

“What’ll you have?” asked the man with the greasy apron.

“May I see a menu?”

“What do you want a menu for? We have soup.”

“What kinds of soup do you have?”

“Soup. That’s what we have. You want some soup?”

“You know, that’s just what I was going to order,” said Dr. Craddock. “Feels like a good morning for soup.”

Greasy apron guy brought the soup over, and, much to Dr. Craddock's chagrin...it was gray-looking soup....the color of a mouse!

Dr. Craddock got a small bit of that soup in his spoon, and he put the spoon to his lips, and—YUCK! Mouse-colored soup? No way.

He couldn't eat the soup, but he put his hands around the bowl to keep himself warm.

Then the door to the depot opened again.
Shut the door!

In came a woman who looked like she was struggling.
Her coat was tattered, her appearance was unkempt.
She found what was, perhaps, the last available seat in that cafe.

Greasy apron guy came to her.

“What do you want?”

“A glass of water, please.”

He brought the water, took out his tablet.

“Now what'll you have?”

“I'm fine, just the water.”

“You have to order, lady.”

“Well, I just want a glass of water.”

“Look, I have customers that pay...now what do you want?”

“Just the water and some time to get warm.”

“Ma'am, there are people that are paying here. If you're not going to order, you've got to leave!”

And he got real loud about it.

And all the noise in the depot started to hush.

And everyone looked at the woman and the guy in the greasy apron.

The woman sighed, and got up to leave.

And then, almost as if it had been rehearsed, the person sitting next to her stood up to leave.

Then a couple people in the booth behind them stood up...then another booth stood up, then the person next to Dr. Craddock stood up, so he felt compelled, and he stood up too.

And the man with the greasy apron said, “All right, all right, she can stay.”

Everybody sat back down, and he brought her a bowl of soup on the house.

And the place grew quiet, except for the sound of the sipping of that grey soup.

Dr. Craddock said to himself, “Maybe I’ll try that soup again.”

He took an entire spoonful this time...he put that grey, mouse-colored soup to his lips...and he tasted it...he swallowed it...and you know what?

It wasn’t too bad!

He had misjudged the soup!

How could soup that had tasted so poorly suddenly taste so good?¹

Well, you know why.

It had something to do with connection, right?

It was the power of connection in that café that day.

Connection, you see, doesn’t just change the taste of soup.

¹ Dr. Craddock told this story in a variety of places. A version of it can be found in *Craddock Stories*, by Fred B. Craddock, edited by Mike Graves and Richard Ward, St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001.

In church, focusing on connection—it just might change:
how we welcome people, how we thank people,
how we invite and befriend other people...
all that can make a difference,
or perhaps THE difference,
for anyone who walks through these doors...

About four months after the shootings at Columbine High School back in 1999, a man in his late 20's began attending worship at Central Presbyterian Church in downtown Denver with some regularity.

I'm told that he would come in just as the service was beginning. He would sit near the side and in the back of the sanctuary. He was always quite attentive, and he always departed as soon as the service ended.

One Sunday, when he attended the early service, he was coming straight from work. That was when the pastor at the church learned that this young man was a firefighter. After worship, the visitor apologized for his non-church attire, and my colleague assured him it was just fine.

That led to introductions.

His name was Matt.

He worked at a station not too far from the church.

And he reported to my colleague that—except for a random wedding or funeral—he had never been to church in his life. Which led to another conversation a couple weeks later as this young man uncharacteristically lingered after worship.

There had been a baptism that morning in worship.

So he asked about baptism.

What was it? Why was it? What did it mean?

He laughed and said that,
 as someone who worked with fire hoses,
 he often felt like he “got baptized every day...”

Then conversation turned to Columbine.
 About being a first responder to that tragedy.
 About what he saw that day.

It made him think, he said.
 What was his life all about?
Where was his life going?

Mind you, it’s not like Matt was doing something pointless with his life—he was a firefighter, for goodness sake!

He was putting his life on the line for his community every day!

And yet, when Matt was baptized in worship a few weeks later,
 he told my colleague beforehand
 that it was like he heard something calling him—
 to a deeper IDENTITY, a greater PURPOSE,
 to a newfound CONNECTION
 that he had never experienced before....²

Have you ever considered how powerful, how important our
 connection to Christ’s Church can be?

It wasn’t just Jesus who said it.
 So did Paul.

² For this story, I am indebted to a sermon by the Rev. Mark Ramsey, “Five Baptisms,” preached at Westlake Hills Presbyterian Church, Austin, TX, January 8, 2017.

In our Romans text for today, Paul writes:

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly...so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

Paul’s not just talking about the connections we make in here. He’s talking about the connections we make OUT THERE. He’s talking about what it means to be a follower of Christ in the world...

Connection to Christ, according to Paul, is no small thing.

Bless those who persecute you?
Live peaceably with all?

According to Paul, it means we have the power to “overcome evil with good.”

Do you believe that?
Do you believe that the connections Christ builds—
gives us the power to overcome evil with good?

I remember when I first heard the story of Immaculee Ilibagiza.

Immaculee is a survivor of the Rwandan genocide that took place in 1994. She was a Tutsi, a member of the tribe that was being killed by the hundreds of thousands.

She is also a Christian, a member of the Roman Catholic Church.

She survived those horrors almost 3 decades ago because a Hutu minister hid her and six other women in a tiny, rarely used bathroom in the corner of this minister's house.

The size of the bathroom was worse than a prison.
It measured 3 ft by 4 ft.
For 91 days, those 7 women stayed in that room,
taking turns standing and stretching...
they could not bathe,
sometimes they ate bugs...

One night, under the cover of darkness, the women escaped to a French compound and were rescued.

Some time later, during an interview, Immaculee was asked if she had the opportunity, would she take revenge.

She said no.
The interviewer...did not believe her.

After all, one of her Hutu neighbors, a man named Alex, had been responsible for murdering two members of Immaculee's family. When Alex was interviewed, he said he would have killed Immaculee too, had he ever found her.

"You weren't tempted to take his head and shake it?" the interviewer asked Immaculee.

"No," Immaculee responded. "I don't want them after killing my family to give me this luggage in my heart, in my belly...to hold this anger. Revenge only prolongs the pain..."³

³ I could not locate the original source for this story. Immaculee Ilibagiza has written two books and tells her story in a variety of settings that can be found on the Internet.

How did she do it?
I don't know how she did it.
Maybe...she didn't do it.

I don't mean Immaculee fabricated her story of survival and forgiveness.

I mean maybe it was Christ at work in her.
Christ who gave her the strength to stay alive,
Christ who gave Immaculee the courage—
to show compassion to neighbors who committed such evil acts.

Look, I hope you never have to come face to face with the kind of evil that Immaculee encountered.

I do hope that you will see and know the power of Christ's connection to you...

It's not the power to make lots of money.
It's not the power to live in your dream home.
It's not even the power to have a comfortable life, as much as all of us may desire a comfortable life.

It's the power to recognize that we are all cut from the same cloth.
And that we all are in need of God's grace.

“I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”

Friends, the good news of the gospel is that we are NEVER apart from Christ...even when we don't realize Christ is with us.

Do you remember that grey soup?

When I heard Dr. Craddock tell that story in a preaching conference many years, I remember him saying that it took him a moment to figure out what that mouse-colored soup tasted like...it was a familiar taste, but he couldn't quite place it...

And then he knew.

He said it tasted a bit, just a little bit,
like the bread of life and the cup of salvation...

Amen.