

Message: "How Are You Connecting?"**I love the scriptures we read earlier, from Acts 1 and 2.**

They're like bookends, creating a sense of invitation, connection and engagement. It starts with the resurrected Jesus, who is telling his followers what to expect. Jesus asks for patience as they wait for the gift God promised. He makes an amazing invitation,

"... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8, CEB).

It's hard to imagine how they feel, particularly when Jesus rises up and disappears. I believe God shows a sense of humor. While the disciples are standing there, two of God's messengers appear and say, *"Why do you just stand here looking up at an empty sky? ... Jesus who was taken up from among you to heaven will come as certainly - and mysteriously - as he left"* (Acts 1:11, MSG). This is a moment of validation, but it does show some humor.

They're telling them not to be idle, but to reflect and act, even during the time when they're waiting for the Holy Spirit. They began with prayer. I believe the disciples were busy during the next 40 days, sharing their stories, connecting with friends, family and acquaintances. When Peter speaks and 3,000 people join (Acts 2:41), there were a lot of people ready for the next step in their relationship because of the way the disciples connected with them.

Acts 2:42-47 gives us a snapshot of the life of Jesus' early followers.

They were filled with awe at what God was doing among them. Everyone was engaged with their community regularly through teaching, sharing simple meals and prayers, and caring for other's needs. They met in the temple and homes. They praised God and showed God's goodness to everyone. Luke shares the result: *"Every day their number grew as God added those who were saved"* (v47, MSG).

How did people come to follow Jesus? By intentionally inviting, connecting and engaging others to pass on the goodness of God. Between Jesus' invitation and the inspiring lives of engaged believers lies the bridge: connecting to God and each other in relationship!

The story of the early church is inspiring. But, if you’re like me, it seems like an ideal. We rarely see groups that are so altruistic and loving toward one another today. We struggle to see how we could live up to that standard, so we tend to ignore or dismiss it.

Being connected in a loving, caring way is possible with God.

All we have to do is connect with people. Let me offer some evidence.

A few years ago, I met Ron and Michelle Conlee. They didn’t show up one Sunday morning. I didn’t get their name, visit them at home and invite them. They came to be part of the church in a more indirect way.

The church had a gym. It needed work, but the members found a way to do the repairs. Before they knew it, the gym was full five nights a week. Ron was a basketball coach and his wife Michelle was a cheerleading coach. They originally came as renters.

The church members decided they wanted to do more to offer hospitality to the groups who came on campus. We started by connecting with the groups, offering water and occasional snacks. We gave small tokens to kids at Christmas. We put up displays showing Scouting events and other church activities.

At the time, we had a Tuesday night Bible study. It was right after Ron’s class, so I’d often talk to him. I’d ask him how his class was going. He would ask me what we were learning. Ron told me his family didn’t go to church. They didn’t read the Bible.

One night, the Holy Spirit gave us courage. We invited Ron to stay after his class and try out the Bible study. No strings attached. I admit, I was a little anxious. Ron and Michelle were in their mid-30s. The class was made up of people in their mid-60s. I wasn’t sure the two groups would mix well or connect.

To my joy, they did. The group loved having Ron there. They went out of their way to show their appreciation and were very patient. Ron’s response was “Wow!” He came back. He invited Michelle. They both began to come regularly. They didn’t come to church on Sunday. That was their family time. Yet they never missed a class on Tuesday for more than two years!

It was an eye-opening experience! Ron and Michelle are honest. They admitted they didn't own a Bible. We gave them two. They didn't know how to read it or where to start. We offered some advice. They had a LOT of questions about what they were reading. We spoke about our Wesleyan traditions, personal experience and grace.

God was working on all of us. We could watch the couple bloom and grow right in front of us. It was inspiring. Ron and Michelle joined the church and their son Evan got involved in the scouting program. Some of the scouts started coming to church. Ron became a Trustee. They rarely came on Sunday, but were connected. It was their church.

Everyone benefited. The kids in Ron's class benefited as he shared the stories. The congregation benefited from new light and life. Our community benefited through service and a positive presence.

We're in the middle of a sermon series on intentional discipleship. Knowing our lives have been made better by Jesus' love inspires us to join in the mission possible. Last week we reflected on the way Jesus invites everyone to follow him. Jesus speaks to people where they are, using language they know saying (Matthew 4:19),

“Come, follow me and I will show you how to fish for people”

Jesus calls us to follow and then he invites people to come and see who and what we are: real people with real faith. All are welcome to come and participate, no matter where we're coming from, what we believe or what our circumstance may be.

Today, we've been talking about the second part of intentional discipleship: connection. Connection is a big word in the United Methodist Church. It's theology in practice. It refers not only to the “machinery of the church, but the oneness of our union. Connection is a mark of Methodism. It shapes us, describes us and seeks to unify us.”¹

What we're focusing on is what our founder, John Wesley, called practical divinity. It's the foundation to living by faith. The way we connect is a crucial step in our spiritual lives together. It's what makes the Ron's and Michelle's in our community find a home they never knew they were missing, with Jesus.

¹ Russel Richey, Dennis Campbell, William Lawrence, *Marks of Methodism*, Abingdon Press, 2005, pp. 17-41

What does it mean to connect? I offer this definition: we connect when we invest in relationship. That's the difference between being a spectator and someone who wants to participate. We don't connect when we need something, but when we care. That's a shift in the way we think about relationships. It's not the golden rule, "Do to others as you would have them do to you." It's "Do good to others even when you have no reason to do so."

Connecting is about building relationships. It means spending time getting to know one another. It takes patience. It's not the same as casual acquaintance. We begin to see each other differently.

What's the goal? Most of us are willing to invest our time, energy and resources in relationships that are mutually beneficial. The objective of the relationship is to care for, and build up the other person, no matter what. No one is being taken for granted. No advantage is taken.

Authentic relationships come out of moments when we encounter brokenness and suffering, particularly our own. When we're at our most vulnerable, yet we feel valued, loved and accepted, that's when God's love is at work. It speaks to a deeper part of us, our soul. That goes beyond words. Pardon and healing happens when we embrace the gentle love of God through the care of other people, our spiritual family.

A covenant relationship is the most fulfilling kind of relationship. It's different than a contract, which is the exchange of one thing for another. A covenant implies giving oneself to another. That's a different kind of fulfillment. These relationships require more but offer more at a deeper level inside of us. The more you give, the deeper you go and the more your soul is connected.

A community based on covenant relationship is set apart: all voices are heard, affirmed and accepted with grace. Everyone is included. No one is excluded. Hospitality is practiced. We treat each other with dignity and respect. There are times when the relationship will be uncomfortable. We don't know where it's going, but we trust God and each other. We're willing to help others, even when it doesn't feel good in the moment.

We can be that kind of community. It takes prayer and the work of connection.

For example, some of us supported the march in downtown LA for the DACA dreamers. It's risky and scary to the ones involved, especially those at risk of deportation, yet it's a moment when we're sharing God's goodness. We don't all agree on the march; however, we respect each other's call to serve as God leads us. We share a common purpose, our connection, even when we may have different opinions or values. That's what true relationship is in God's kingdom.

Why does connection matter? To answer that, let me tell you a story. One of Ron's biggest concerns was how to put what he was learning into practice. For example, Ron's neighbor got on his nerves. He parked the car on Ron's driveway without asking. Their trash was all over the yard, making the neighborhood look bad. And, to top it off, they threw late night parties, playing music obnoxious to Ron and Michelle.

Ron wanted to give them a piece of his mind and if that didn't work, a piece of his fist. The Tuesday night group was a gift. He connected with a small group of people where he could let off steam. Ron trusted them. They listened to him. It was a mutually beneficial relationship. The group looked at Scripture. They talked about their experiences.

Ron realized one thing. He didn't really know his neighbors. So Ron began to pray. He looked for chances to connect with them. Little by little, the ice began to thaw. Ron helped his neighbors. The yard work got done. They were more aware. There were fewer late night parties.

Ron and Michelle were able to connect and change their next door strangers into next door neighbors. They did so because they'd experienced the unconditional love and grace of God themselves. The love that changed their lives changed their neighbor's lives.

What does connection mean to you? I invite you to think about what you're doing to connect and build spiritually healthy relationships. Join a small group, take a class, attend Bible study or a prayer group. Get to know others, particularly those you haven't met. Show hospitality inside and outside the four walls of this building. When you do, I promise you'll be inspired as you see others connect and grow by faith.

That's how we'll know God is blessing us. Let's go and pass it on!

Let us pray

Acts 1:3-11 (CEB)

After his suffering, he showed them that he was alive with many convincing proofs. He appeared to them over a period of forty days, speaking to them about God's kingdom. While they were eating together, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait for what the Father had promised. He said, "This is what you heard from me: John baptized with water, but in only a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

As a result, those who had gathered together asked Jesus, "Lord, are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now?" Jesus replied, "It isn't for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has set by his own authority. Rather, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

After Jesus said these things, as they were watching, he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going away and as they were staring toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood next to them. They said, "Galileans, why are you standing here, looking toward heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way that you saw him go into heaven."

Acts 2:42-47 (CEB)

The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers. A sense of awe came over everyone. God performed many wonders and signs through the apostles. All the believers were united and shared everything. They would sell pieces of property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them. Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity. They praised God and demonstrated God's goodness to everyone. The Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved.