Sunday October 13, 2024

First Lesson: John 15:5

Gospel Lesson: Mark 10: 17-31

Sermon Series: Connections: Understanding Connections

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Good morning Beloved Community,

* We are continuing with the sermon series Connections.
* I would like to publicly thank Alex Steadman and Dr. Redding for kicking this sermon series off.
* The purpose of this sermon series is to define and understand the connections that define and shape our world and every day life experiences and interactions.
* This week I am preaching on the concept of “Understanding Connections.”
* As we journey through life, it becomes ever clearer to me that nothing exists in isolation.
* Our world is woven together in a sacred **and dare I suggest intentional** web of connection— that stretches across every aspect of our existence.
* From the profound mysteries of creation to the complex systems of justice and peace, from the tenderness of family bonds to the deep wisdom found in scripture,  **I stopped by to proclaim this morning that everything is interconnected.**
* **Therefore understanding these connections is not just important; it is essential.**
* **It’s essential** because we are part of something much larger than ourselves, something that is living and breathing in every moment.
* In this reality, we are called to be stewards of creation, guardians of justice, and companions to one another as we seek to do life together.
* **Furthermore, in each of these roles, the thread of connection ties us to something greater than our individual experiences.**
* In creation, we see that the earth and all its creatures are interdependent. **The air we breathe, the water we drink, the soil that nurtures life—all are gifts from God’s creation, given not for exploitation but for care.**
* This is why **when we harm the environment, we harm ourselves, and we dishonor the Creator.**
* This also means that our environmental stewardship must come from a place of reverence, understanding **that we are caretakers in a shared home, a home we must leave better for future generations.**
* **In matters of social justice**, we see the same interwoven fabric. **The injustice suffered by one impacts the humanity of us all.** Scripture reminds us that when one member of the body suffers, all suffer (1 Corinthians 12:26).
* Our faith therefore compels us **to lift up the oppressed, to speak out against injustice, and to work for systems that reflect God’s vision of love, justice, and equality.**
* **For I stopped by to proclaim that these issues are not "their" problems; they are our problems.**
* **Understanding the connection**s between the marginalization of the poor, the disenfranchisement of communities, and systemic injustice helps us move from passive observers to active participants in God’s redeeming work.
* **The same holds true within our families and our communities.** We are bound together by relationships that give us strength and purpose.
* **This is why when a family member is hurting, the whole family feels it.**
* When our church or community faces challenges, **it is not just an isolated concern but a call to action for all of us.** By investing in our relationships—by seeking deeper understanding, healing, and reconciliation—we honor the sacred bonds God has placed between us.
* **Even in scripture, connection is woven throughout.**
* The stories we read in the Bible are not meant to be understood in isolation, but in conversation with one another, with our own stories, and with the living presence of God in the world today.
* **Scripture calls us to see how God’s love flows through every page, every prophet, every parable, tying together the people of God across time and space.**
* **When we understand these connections**—whether in creation, in justice, in family, in scripture, or in our communal concerns—**we begin to live into the fullness of our calling as God’s people.**
* **We move from a place of individualism—- to a place of beloved community.**
* **We begin to see that our concerns are not separate, but deeply intertwined. What happens to the least of us affects all of us. The cries of creation are the cries of God’s heart. The pain of injustice is the pain of our shared humanity.**

# In exploring the connections that I am seeing in both of our lessons this morning beginning with John 15:5; Jesus offers a simple but profound image of connection: "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me, you can do nothing."

* This verse Church family, highlights the essential spiritual connection between Christ and believers.
* **Just as branches must remain connected to the vine to bear fruit, we must stay connected to Christ to live meaningful, spiritually fruitful lives.**
* The central connection here is between our personal faith and our reliance on Christ’s life-giving presence.
* Without Christ, **we are disconnected**, like a branch cut off from its source of life, unable to thrive or fulfill our purpose.
* Similarly in our gospel lesson of Mark 10: 17-31;
* Jesus’ interaction with the rich young ruler goes much deeper into the theme of connection—particularly, the interconnectedness between personal wealth, social justice, and discipleship. The man asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"
* When Jesus tells him to sell his possessions, give to the poor, and follow Him, the man leaves sorrowful because of his wealth. Jesus then teaches, **"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”**
* Understanding the connections in this story underscores from my perspective, multiple layers of connection.
* **The first connection** I am seeing is a theme of wealth and social responsibility being highlights.
* Jesus **points out the connection between wealth and how it affects others, particularly the poor.**
* The command to sell possessions and give to the poor is not just a personal spiritual challenge **but a call to recognize the social implications of wealth.**
* **The rich man’s wealth creates a barrier not only between him and God but also between him and those in need.**
* **The second connection** that I am seeing in this story is a connection between wealth and discipleship.
* There is a deep connection between discipleship and sacrifice.
* Jesus is showing that **true discipleship requires letting go of attachments—whether they are to wealth, power, or status—so that one’s life can be fully oriented toward God and the community.**
* The rich young ruler cannot follow Jesus fully **because his wealth keeps him from entering into a more profound relationship with God and others.**
* **The third connection** I am seeing in our story is one between eternal life and the kingdom of God.
* Jesus’ teaching connects eternal life **not with strict adherence to the law or moral codes**, but with how we relate to others, especially those marginalized or in need.
* **The kingdom of God is about relationships: how we are connected to God, how we treat others, and how we live in community.**
* Discipleship is not just about personal salvation; it is about **living in such a way that promotes justice, equity, and care for the community.**

# Therefore, why these connections are important for us to really understand in our story from my perspective, is because this message though directed to the rich young ruler, is painted broadly at anyone whose attachments—whether to wealth, power, or status—impede their ability to fully follow God.

* This message resonates deeply with the work of **United Women in Faith** whose mission aligns with Jesus’ call **to break free from these attachments,** enabling individuals and communities to live full and joy-filled lives centered on justice, compassion, and care for the vulnerable.
* You see Church Family, **United Women in Faith** have long recognized that the attachments to wealth, power, and privilege create deep inequalities that harm not only individuals but entire communities.
* Their work is an embodiment of Jesus' message in this passage, as they have actively engaged in addressing the systemic barriers that keep people bound to materialism, social status, and oppression.
* Through their advocacy, education, and mission work, **they help others break these attachments**, allowing for spiritual liberation and a more just, equitable world.

# Some of the UWF ladies were kind enough to loan to me some of their Response magazines that highlights several powerful initiatives that reflect their commitment to these principles;

* For example, one of their missions involves **anti-human trafficking efforts:** By advocating for policies and resources to combat human trafficking, they challenge systems of exploitation, which often rely on power dynamics and economic inequity.
* **Another example of one of their missions is environmental justice:** The UWF have been vocal about the need to address climate change and environmental degradation, recognizing that the destruction of creation disproportionately impacts the poor and marginalized. Their environmental initiatives reflect a commitment to breaking the attachment to unsustainable practices of exploitation, promoting stewardship of creation that honors God and serves future generations.
* Another example, **Empowerment of women and children**: United Women in Faith have consistently worked to uplift women and children, particularly those in marginalized communities. By supporting educational opportunities, advocating for fair wages, and providing resources for healthcare, they break the societal attachments to systems that limit opportunities for women and children to thrive, thereby opening pathways for them to live fuller, more abundant lives.
* Finally, United Women in Faith has a clear message on **addressing racial injustice**: The organization's emphasis on racial justice is another reflection of their mission to dismantle systems of power and privilege. They have spoken out against racial inequality in the criminal justice system, healthcare, and housing.

# Along these lines, I had the privilege of hearing an OLLI presentation which is the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at the University of Nebraska; where the presenter Gail Shaffer Blankenau gave a sobering presentation entitled “Journey to Freedom: Uncovering the Grayson Sisters’ Escape from Nebraska Territory.”

* To simplify her presentation into one startling conclusion for many of us to awaken to is that slavery existed in Nebraska.
* You see Church family, the story of the Grayson sisters’ daring escape across the icy river from Nebraska Territory echoes the timeless struggle for freedom from the chains of oppression.
* With courage that defied the treacherous elements and the violent hand of racism, they crossed a literal and metaphorical river to claim their God-given right to live in dignity and peace.
* This journey was not just about survival but about breaking free from systems designed to keep them bound—to wealth, to power, to status—and **finding liberation on the other side.**
* And so if I were to summarize the work of the United Women in Faith into one simple sentence in light of this story, their work involves helping people **find liberation on the other side.**
* In making the connection regarding the story of the Grayson sisters whose escape was set within the era of the mid-1800s where like many areas in the U.S., was part of a broader struggle over slavery and freedom, especially in relation to the Missouri Compromise and the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854—and since **United Methodist Women** (now known as **United Women in Faith**) has a long and rich history, tracing its origins back to 1869 with a group of eight women in Boston, Massachusetts, organized to send a female doctor and teacher to India to serve women’s health and educational needs—it is fairly safe to connect the idea that **United Women in Faith** embody the same spirit of courage and liberation that carried the Grayson sisters across that icy river.
* They work tirelessly to break the attachments of wealth and racism that continue to oppress the marginalized, standing at the crossroads of justice and faith.
* Like the river that the sisters crossed, **the United Women in Faith** guide the oppressed toward freedom—freedom from economic injustice, racial discrimination, and systems of inequality.
* Therefore let this be an example, Lincoln First!
* **Let this be an example of the work we are called to embody—the work of liberation, the work of justice, the work of setting the captives free!**
* **There are rivers of injustice** that freeze the hearts of the oppressed.
* **There are rivers of racism**, **rivers of inequality, rivers of poverty, rivers of despair.** And like those sisters, we are called to cross them.
* **We are called to step out in faith, step out in courage, and make our way to the other side**—where freedom awaits, where liberation calls, where God’s kingdom of justice and peace beckons us forward.
* For **the icy river is before us.**
* **The icy river is before us** in the cries of the marginalized,
* **The icy river is before us** in the struggles of the poor, in the oppression of the voiceless.
* **The icy river is before us,** but the good news is that we do not cross alone!
* **We cross** with one another,
* We cross with the Spirit of God, and **we cross** with the power of love and justice guiding us.
* So, **let Lincoln First be the church that crosses the river.**
* **Let us be the church that helps others find liberation on the other side.**
* **Let us** embody the spirit of courage, of faith, of radical love, just as the Grayson sisters did.
* **The icy river is before us**, but by God’s grace, we will not only cross it—we will bring others with us into the promised land of justice, freedom, and joy.

Amen.