**Sunday October 27, 2024**

**First Lesson: John 15:4**

**Gospel Lesson: Mark 10:46–52**

**Sermon Series: Connections: Strengthening Connections**

**Preacher: Kirstie Jeanette Engel**

•     We are continuing with the sermon series Connections- a sermon series that is seeking to understand the connections that define and shape our world and every day life experiences and interactions.

•     This week I am preaching upon the theme, **Strengthening Connections.**

* Last week, we spent time together in John 15:5, reflecting on what it means to establish a deep connection—one where Christ is the vine and we, as a community, are the branches.
* We explored how being connected to the vine brings life, strength, and purpose to each of us, linking us together as one body.
* Today, I want to continue this conversation by looking at what happens when those connections are broken or strained.
* How then do you strengthen those types of connections?
* Relationships sometimes suffer, communities experience division, and even our own connection to Christ can feel distant.
* When the ties that once held us together start to fray, is it worth the effort to mend them? And what does it mean to strengthen these connections, especially in moments of conflict or disconnection?
* Together, let’s explore the importance of reconciliation, not only with each other but with God, who calls us to be rooted deeply, even when it feels difficult or uncomfortable.
* **To do this reconciling work, let’s turn to the Gospel of Mark, specifically Mark 10:46-52.**
* This passage tells the story of Bartimaeus, a blind beggar sitting by the roadside in Jericho.
* As Jesus and His followers were passing by, Bartimaeus cried out, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”
* Though others rebuked him and tried to silence him, Bartimaeus only cried out louder until Jesus stopped and called him over.
* When Bartimaeus reached Jesus, he asked, “What do you want me to do for you?” Bartimaeus replied, “Rabbi, I want to see.” Jesus responded, “Go, your faith has healed you.” Immediately, Bartimaeus received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.
* Giving some historical background; In the time of Jesus, Jericho was a bustling city—a place of commerce and trade, yet also a hub where marginalized individuals, like Bartimaeus, were often left to the side, both literally and figuratively.
* Beggars were a common sight, especially near city gates where they would wait in hope of alms from travelers.
* In Jewish society, physical blindness was often viewed as a result of sin or divine punishment, **so Bartimaeus would not only have been physically impaired but also socially isolated and spiritually stigmatized.**
* By shouting, “Son of David,” Bartimaeus acknowledges Jesus’ messianic identity, which was a bold claim to make publicly, especially in the face of rebuke from others.
* This title connected Jesus to the prophetic lineage of King David, representing hope for restoration, healing, and reconnection with God.
* It’s significant that Bartimaeus, in his blind state, could *see* who Jesus truly was, while many around him, despite physical sight, failed to recognize Jesus’ messianic identity and role.
* So that is the history— so let’s see where the severed and restored connections are in our story shall we?
* I would suggest that there are several layers of severed and restored connections throughout this story.
* The first severed connection that I am seeing is with Bartimaeus who represents those who have been “cut off” or marginalized by society, whose needs and cries have been ignored or suppressed.
* **His persistence in calling out to Jesus reflects a deep desire for connection, healing, and restoration—not only of sight but of his place within the community.**
* For you see church family, this is where the tension of the story really surfaces for me and many of our Wednesday Night Class scholars as well —and we can find this tension in vs 48 where it says; *Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!”*
* Here, "the many" represent the community, **which was actively working to silence Bartimaeus and, in doing so, to sever his connection.**
* Instead of extending support or compassion, **they were intent on keeping him quiet, holding him back from the one who could truly bring him healing.**
* In this act of silencing Church family, I believe we see a common yet troubling pattern that communities often fall into—**a tendency to exclude, to marginalize, and to deny the voice of those who are crying out.**
* We must ask ourselves, "Who are the ‘many’ in our communities today? Who is being sternly ordered to be quiet?"
* In the time of Bartimaeus, it might have been religious leaders or townsfolk who saw his condition as a nuisance, as something better left ignored.
* But today, we see similar tendencies in various kinds of communities.
* Often, society at large turns away from those who are homeless, people struggling with mental health issues, or those who speak inconvenient truths.
* We see it in schools and workplaces, where people are told to conform, to fit in, to keep quiet about their unique struggles or differences. **And yes, we even see it in the church.**
* In the church, this pattern can be especially painful.
* Church is meant to be a place of refuge, of acceptance, of healing and community, yet too often, people find themselves silenced here as well.
* We may find ourselves uncomfortable with voices that challenge our norms or our comfort zones.
* Perhaps it’s the youth who bring fresh questions, the elderly who feel their voices no longer matter, or those who bring their hurts and wounds openly, hoping for a safe space.
* How often does the church fail to hear these voices, opting instead to encourage silence rather than the honest, sometimes uncomfortable, cries for mercy and belonging?
* The many who tried to silence Bartimaeus didn’t understand that by attempting to quiet him, they were not only denying his voice but were also severing his access to Jesus.
* This is the essence of exclusion in a community: when people are pushed aside, they lose connection to the life, love, and healing available through Christ.
* **The second prominent disconnection I am seeing in our story in addition to the community's efforts to silence him, is Bartimaeus’ blindness itself—which contributed to his disconnection from the world around him.**
* In the society of his time, blindness was not only a physical limitation but also a social barrier.
* People with disabilities, especially those visible like blindness, were often relegated to the fringes, left to beg by the side of the road, and stripped of the dignity and inclusion we all seek.
* Bartimaeus was isolated and unseen, treated as if he had little value or worth.
* His blindness was, in a sense, a barrier to connection with others—compounded by a community that did not make space for him.
* This lack of space and understanding often happens in our world today.
* People with physical disabilities frequently face more than just physical challenges; they encounter societal limitations imposed by communities that fail to accommodate or welcome them fully.
* Instead of fostering environments of belonging, communities sometimes unwittingly create spaces that are inaccessible, both physically and socially.
* When spaces, activities, or traditions are designed without the needs of all in mind, it signals to those with disabilities that they are, in a sense, "left out" or, even worse, “inconvenient.”
* Consider how many of our public spaces, our programs, and even our places of worship remain physically or attitudinally unwelcoming to those with disabilities.
* When ramps are an afterthought, when services don’t include sign language interpreters, or when worship spaces lack accommodations for those with sensory needs, we are inadvertently severing connections. We are saying, “This space wasn’t made with you in mind.”
* Such barriers that are demarcated in this manner, separate people from full participation and from the opportunity to connect with others and with Christ.
* **Looking at some of the connections that are being restored in this passage, for that is the good news of our story today—-is that these severed connections are restored and strengthened!**
* It was through one way and one way only….**Faith!**
* You see Church family Bartimaeus’ faith—his deep belief that Jesus has the power to heal and restore—is a crucial element in his reconnection.
* **When Jesus says, “Your faith has healed you,” it’s a reminder that faith can bridge what seems broken beyond repair.**
* For Bartimaeus, this meant a physical healing and a return to community, as he immediately began to follow Jesus, symbolizing his restored place within both the spiritual and social community.
* This passage invites us to consider how our faith might similarly heal and strengthen the broken connections in our own lives.
* When connections are severed—whether due to misunderstanding, pain, or silence—**reaching out in faith, with persistence and a willingness to listen, can bring us closer to one another and to God.**
* Some practical ways we can do that as a church community is **creating accessible worship spaces.**
* You all may be noticing construction tape everywhere around our building. This is because our South and East stairs are undergoing maintenance right now to repair the chips and racks that have been developing before they get worse over the winter!
* This is one step closer to ensuring that our worship spaces are physically accessible to everyone.
* **As a community we must come together thinking beyond compliance with basic regulations and truly considering the diverse needs of those who come to worship.**
* Accessible seating, ramps, wide doorways, and visible signage are important starting points. Additionally, offering resources such as hearing aids, large print bulletins, and ASL interpretation shows intentionality in our welcome.
* **When our spaces are created with accessibility in mind, we demonstrate that every person is valued and has a place in the body of Christ.**
* Another way that we as a community can reach out in faith is by fostering inclusive community events and programs which we do well but can go even further in.
* Inclusive programming creates a bridge between the church and the broader community. Events such as community dinners, free family movie nights, or outdoor worship services, carnivals and so forth in public spaces offer a welcoming, low-pressure way for people to connect with the church.
* There are so many other ways that we as a community can reach out in faith, such as encouraging intergenerational connections, embracing technology for broader connection, building partnerships with Community Organizations such as the Malone Center in which we are already doing, but the key is we don’t stop there….**we keep going…we keep moving…we keep persisting in our efforts!**
* **Thereby making our charge that when we hear the cries of our community**"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”—
* **Let us not be** like the “many” who rebuked Bartimaeus, trying to silence his plea, trying to quiet his desperation.
* **Let us be that community that hears**.
* **Let us be the ones who respond**, not with rebuke but with love, not with fear of the unknown or resistance; **instead let us respond with a hand outstretched, with a heart open wide.**
* When we hear the cry for mercy, let us be those who embody the mercy of Christ, who let the love of Jesus flow through us to those who need it most.
* Like Bartimaeus, we are called to believe that **no connection is beyond repair and that God desires healing, not only for our bodies but for our relationships and communities.**
* In the spirit of Bartimaeus’ faith, let us approach Jesus today with our own desires for healing and reconciliation, trusting that as we reach out, we can be restored and strengthened together in the love of Christ.
* The good news is that **we *can be the ears, the hands, the feet of Jesus in our world.***
* **Let’s make a difference together Church!**
* Let The Church Say Amen!