

Introduction toConnections Interim Event, November 3, 2019
Grace and Holy Trinity Church, Richmond, VA
The Rev. Bill Queen, “Connections to the Far Off and to the Near”

today’s topic of “Connections” could also be called that of ‘relationships;’ this idea of connectedness is something much deeper than our working alongside each other and alongside other people to get tasks done; it is much more than our contributing money or volunteer time to our ministries or to other organizations; connecting deeply with other people— and especially connecting deeply with people who are different from us—and connecting deeply with God, are so closely tied together that you cannot separate the ways that we relate to each other and to other people from the ways we relate to God; you cannot relate to God if you are not relating in godly ways with other people; so let’s look more closely at the prayer and Bible passages

Collect For Cities

Heavenly Father, in your Word you have given us a vision of that holy City to which the nations of the world bring their glory: Behold and visit, we pray, the cities of the earth. Renew the ties of mutual regard which form our civic life. Send us honest and able leaders. Enable us to eliminate poverty, prejudice, and oppression, that peace may prevail with righteousness, and justice with order, and that men and women from different cultures and with differing talents may find with one another the fulfillment of their humanity; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

this talks about our relationship with God often being mediated through other people; and that we find fulfillment of our true God-given humanity by connecting with people who differ from us; it also reminds us that cities can be dangerous and lonely places, where people may feel sharply disconnected from each other; but it holds up the promise of a better future for everyone by working together, with God’s guidance

Isaiah 57:13b-14, 18-19

The Lord said: Whoever takes refuge in me shall possess the land and inherit my holy mountain. It shall be said, “Build up, build up, prepare the way, remove every obstruction from my people’s way.” ... I have seen their ways,

but I will heal them; I will lead them and repay them with comfort, creating for their mourners the fruit of the lips. Peace, peace, to the far and the near, says the Lord; and I will heal them.

this shows us that God is a refuge to the troubled and is a source of healing to the injured; and God offers this gift of healing to “the far and the near,” however literally or figuratively we may construe the distances between individuals or groups of people; God offers to remove the obstructions dividing people and to bring peoples of different nations and races together in peace; we are reminded of our need for the healing that only God can bring us and of our need to share that healing with others; our knowledge of that shared need creates our deep connectedness with others

Psalm 127

Unless the LORD builds the house, their labor is in vain who build it. Unless the LORD watches over the city, in vain the watchman keeps his vigil. It is in vain that you rise so early and go to bed so late; vain, too, to eat the bread of toil, for he gives to his beloved sleep. Children are a heritage from the LORD, and the fruit of the womb is a gift. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them! he shall not be put to shame when he contends with his enemies in the gate.

this speaks of God being the ultimate builder and protector of “the house”: the house of our minds, bodies, and souls; the house of our family life; the house of our parish; the house of our larger community and of our city; the house that is our nation and the whole earth; what will it take for us to see that all people and all of God’s creation, far and near, is our own shared household, over which we all must share responsibility? what will it take for us to see the future of that household in the children and young people among us?

Ephesians 2:13-22

In Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups [Gentiles and Israelites] into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body

through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

in this we see that Christ is God's instrument for bringing people together and for reconciling those who have been seen as outsiders with those who have been seen as insiders; Jews and Gentiles were the two groups being talked about, but substitute any other divided groups and the process of working through divisions is the same: Christ is the one who unites us; in this view there are no "strangers," there are no "aliens," but "one new humanity"; and in words echoing the Isaiah passage, "[Christ] came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near;" it also echoes words from the Psalm, reminding us we are all "members of the household of God"

Mark 6:31-42a

Jesus said to his apostles, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat." But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?" And he said to them, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." When they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish." Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and

gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled.

here we see Jesus inviting his disciples to go away into a deserted area so that they may “rest a while”; but I expect Jesus knew that it would not be a place of leisure; he knew that instead it would be a place where the disciples would learn a valuable lesson about how their connectedness to Christ must also connect them to other people; they propose to Jesus that he send people away to fend for themselves for dinner; Jesus teaches them that it is their responsibility to take care of them: “you give them something to eat”; he is telling them, and us, that we are responsible for other people because we are connected to them as closely as we are connected to Christ; we are connected to them through Christ; and we are connected to Christ through them; and it also challenges our typical mindset of scarcity; we so often focus on what we do not have; Jesus would have us recognize the true abundance of what we do have and invites us to share that abundance

these readings invite us to ask ourselves several different questions about our time and our place here in central Richmond: What kind of healing are we seeking in this parish, and how can we offer that to others? What kinds of obstructions and dividing walls are there between us and other people or groups? Who around us might be considered the “far off” or the “near”, the insiders or the outsiders, the “strangers” or the “aliens”? What might Christ be doing to bring us and others closer together? How might we work to remove such barriers? How can the distances—literally and figuratively—between us and other people be lessened?

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finally, look at the image above; you see there a map of central Richmond; I didn't format or crop this in any way, this is how many people conceive of Richmond's center; notice that if you divide it in half vertically and horizontally, GHTC lies almost in the exact center of this map; we may be at the center of the city, but the book *Toxic Charity* raises a related issue: "As ... commuterized churchgoers ... most churches have lost their community roots, with little connection to the geography surrounding their buildings;" how strong are our community roots?

we'll be using maps in our event today to help us identify some of those geographic characteristics of our parish's location and what kinds of barriers and opportunities those present; we're going to look at who is not at the table—who is not at our table; who is overlooked? who is missing from our sight or from the reach of our ministries? we have to be very careful about being self-satisfied with our parish, about doing what we like, for ourselves, without considering what we need to do for and with the people who are not yet a part of this, God's household, the church

so, with these biblical and theological perspectives in mind, we'll continue with our Connections Event's activities