

It Is All Relative

To live fully – to be all that we can be; to love and to be loved, underneath all the words, phrases, theologies, understandings, differences, personalities and stuff, that is the universal human desire. In order to be good stewards, to be able to give generously and live freely we must find ways to fulfill this yearning, to truly know that we are loved. Quoting an old country song, we often are “looking for love in all the wrong places.”

When the church is fulfilling its purpose, it is the church that is the right place, the place to look for love, given, shared and received. And for the church to be the church it must be relational. Just as one cannot be a sister, brother, parent, cousin, teacher, neighbor, pastor, or child without an “other”, so the church cannot be without relationships and relational living. It is relationships which define us, it is in relationships that we experience growth and in it only through relationships that we share the Gospel, the good news of God known to us through Jesus the Christ, the transforming, life giving, yearning answering Gospel.

Imagine a jigsaw puzzle, each piece fits and brings the overall picture closer to completion, but only be its ability to connect to others, to connect differently but completely on several “sides”. We, the church, are called to invite and nurture relationships of different types. First, necessary for any other relationships to thrive, is the individual and communal relationship with God, Father, Son and Spirit. It is not enough to know about God, to know what words are contained in the Bible. We struggle in our limited understandings on how we can be in relationship with the divine, when so much of our experiences in relationships are with other human. Yet we do experience and grow in maintaining relationships without the physical, earthly aspect. Think of those whom you have loved and lost, and how that relationship continues to be a real and vital part of your life.

One aspect of the power of Emmanuel, of God with us known in the life of Jesus and the experiences of The Holy Spirit, is the ability to see in the story the reality and signs of living relationally with God. The Book of Acts, the story of the birth of the church, is amazing in its telling of that relationally living expanding from the life of one to bring life to the community of faith. The passage of Scripture shared today, often called the sheep and goats, illustrates the second plane of relationships which bring life. That is the relationships we have with others. The phrase spoken by Jesus, “whatever you did to the least of these, **my brothers** (emphasis mine), names that our human relationships are based in and are to flow from our relationship with God.

Imagine the power that will be unleashed as we deliberate see and name that all the “others” in our lives are kin to Christ. We are called into missions, or outreach speaking in United Methodist terms, that is sharing of what we have to help meet the needs of others on a world-wide level. However we are also called to be about making disciples. Disciples are only formed in relationship. The first Christian disciples walked with Jesus, conversed with Jesus, questioned Jesus, tested Jesus, denied and ran away, yet the relationship was never broken. We can only invite others and journey ourselves deeper into discipleship by building and cherishing relationships. That is why it is vital

that we not only gather together for worship, but that we also gather in differing formations, studying, working, playing, praying ... and inviting those who, by the grace of God, our lives intersect. Neighbors, co-workers, family, those we often see as we are out and about, share the same yearning, how can we, in Christ's name, not tell them our stories? For there are other stories they are hearing, stories of despair, stories of mistrust, stories that divide and deny the humanness, and the image of God, in many.

The story of Cain and Abel is a story of an extreme attempt to live outside of relationship building. We don't know, though there has been a lot of guessing, what was unacceptable about Cain's offering. We do know that it was between Cain and God, not Cain and Abel. Scripture also proclaims, again and again, that God looks to the intent of the heart. Hosea 6:6 "For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings", and Micah 6:8 "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" are but two of many naming this clearly.

Rather than build his relationship with God, which would include conviction, acknowledgement of sin, change in behavior and more so of priorities, Cain chose to strike out against his brother. Though not always carried to the extreme of murder, this tendency to strike out through human relationships or refusal to enter into is a common side effect or a broken or stunted relationship with God.

God's questing Cain about his brother is a call back into relationship, relationship with accountability. As we continue on our "We Say Yes" journey, we are tasked with living with the question "where is your" My first tendency was to "correct this question, to name it as "who". Though not an easy question, "who" leaves us alone at the point of naming, of acknowledging that all of humanity matter.

"Where" takes us a step further, takes us into relationship. When we know "where" our is, we also know what they are struggling with, or celebrating, or questioning, or Where our brother/sister/ neighbor is – is where we are to be in Christ's name.

As a community of faith we know who – those around us who have not heard, or not heard in a long time, of the potential of living as a beloved child of God. We need to delve into the "where" – so that we can join them there, love them there, and walk with them into this church. So that our yearning might be fulfilled, so that we might be more fully the body of Christ.