**Sunday October 29, 2024**

**First Lesson: John 15:5**

**Gospel Reading: Mark 10: 35-45**

**Sermon Series: Connections: Establishing 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, **Establishing Connections.**
* In particular, a good starting place of establishing a connection that I think worthy of exploring would be in our first lesson of John 15:5 where it says **5**  “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**.

* For me, this passage is essentially inviting us as a community to establish a connection with this vine in our passage that represents Jesus.
* In our Wednesday Night Applying the sermon to life class, I confessed that this has always been a somewhat difficult task for me to do since moving to Nebraska—**to preach about Jesus.**
* Preaching about Jesus in Nebraska has been a journey of discovery, a stretch of theological imagination.
* Coming from the Black worship experience I was trained in as a pastor, where Jesus is seen in all His divine glory—raising Lazarus from the dead, walking on water, the One who defeats death and ushers in eschatological hope—**I now find myself in a different setting.**
* In Nebraska, Jesus is often framed in terms of service: a good teacher, an example to follow, a model for how we live in the here and now, but less so in terms of His divinity or cosmic significance.
* This shift is not necessarily a bad thing. It offers a nuanced, grounded way of understanding the radical way Jesus lived among the least of these. **But it’s different.**
* I’ve had to wrestle with how to preach a Jesus who resonates with people from various backgrounds, beliefs, and life experiences.
* Here, I am in community with people who hold a beautiful array of beliefs—some exploring Jesus from a distance, others identifying as atheist or agnostic, unsure or even indifferent about His divinity.
* How then do I preach a connection?
* And this is when I go back to my own personal connection with Jesus—
* Meet baby Kirstie Jeanette Lykes, born in Fort Polk Louisiana, whose dad was in the army and I was told that it cost a total of zero dollars for me to be born in the military hospital and $12.00 for the food my mom ate while there in which she confessed wasn’t really all that good—all of this to say— I am not really sure how to feel about any of this at all!
* One thing is for sure, though: **I wasn’t raised knowing Jesus in particular.**
* My mom and dad didn’t take me to church, but they did raise me with a strong sense of right and wrong.
* That moral compass was firmly instilled in me from the start.
* I’m certain my first full sentence must have been, "It's not sposed to be..." because, even as a kid, I had no problem speaking up when something wasn’t right.
* When I was six, we moved to New York, where my dad’s family lived.
* I’m pretty sure they dreaded seeing me coming because I would never hold my tongue about what was "sposed to be" right or wrong.
* By second grade, I had made such an impression that at my parent-teacher conference, Mrs. Kimpson—who, as fate would have it, **was my dad’s childhood girlfriend**—met us for the meeting. And naturally, it was my dad who took me to that conference. **Of course, I told my mom immediately afterward! Simply because that old girlfriend was not “sposed” to be smiling and carrying on with my daddy like that!**
* Family members often warned my parents, "You need to do something with that girl," but I like to think that strong sense of justice and rightness was just who I was from the very beginning.
* From the very beginning, God's prevenient grace—the grace that goes before—was at work in my life, even though I didn’t know it at the time.
* Looking back now, I can see how that grace was guiding me, even in the smallest of ways.
* Whether it was the strong moral compass instilled by my parents or that bold sense of right and wrong I carried as a child, God’s grace was gently nudging me closer to the vine of Christ, as it says in John 15:5: "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."
* Furthermore why I share this piece of my own story is because I believe that this is how God’s prevenient grace works on all of us—-**the Spirit cultivates something within us through our life experiences.**
* You see Church family, as I reflect on my own personal connection between grace and the vine, I realize that I didn’t find Jesus all at once, but grace was leading me toward Him, **little by little.**
* My story, like all of ours, is a journey of connection—experiences, relationships, and inner stirrings that tethered me to the vine long before I fully realized it.
* In light of this, we can see why James and John’s approach in Mark 10:35-45 was all wrong.
* They were not focused on establishing a true connection to Jesus, the vine.
* Instead they were more focused on who would sit at His right and left hand in His glory.
* In this request, they were concerned with gaining honor and prestige—seeking personal benefit rather than allowing God’s grace to draw them closer to Jesus through service and sacrifice.
* Jesus response to them in this request was "You don’t know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" (Mark 10:38).
* James and John wanted the benefits of being close to Jesus but misunderstood what being connected to Him truly meant.
* **They saw the vine as a pathway to personal gain, not as the source of life and service to others.**
* By seeking positions of prestige, they missed the deeper truth: that connection to Christ, the true vine, is not about power or recognition.
* It’s about surrender, sacrifice, and serving others. Jesus continues by saying, "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all" (Mark 10:43-44).
* In other words, to be truly connected to the vine is to be committed to the way of love, service, and humility—bearing the fruit of Christ’s character, **not seeking self-elevation.**
* The hardest work of the Church as I see it will be to embody this task: **moving away from self-elevation and into true connection with the vine, which brings us into true connection with one another.**
* This is where we face the greatest challenge—not just as individuals, but as a community.
* Just as James and John had to learn that their desire for status and recognition was misplaced, we too must learn to lay down our own desires for power, prestige, and self-importance.
* Instead, we are called to seek a deeper relationship with Christ, the vine, so that we can bear fruit that nourishes the world around us.
* In our everyday world, we see the temptation toward self-elevation everywhere.
* Whether it’s in our workplaces, where success is often measured by titles and achievements, or in our social media-driven culture, where we are encouraged to seek likes and followers for validation, **the pull toward focusing on ourselves is strong.**
* Even in our personal relationships, we can sometimes be more concerned with how others see us than with truly connecting with them.
* **But Jesus calls us to something radically different. He calls us to be rooted in the vine—where love, service, and humility are at the core of who we are.**
* When we focus on truly connecting with Christ, we allow Christ’s love to flow through us and into our relationships with others.
* **We stop worrying about our own status and start focusing on how we can serve, how we can lift others up, how we can be a presence of healing and hope in our communities.**
* Take the example of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. His life was not centered on seeking fame or power, but on connecting deeply with the call to justice and love that flowed from his faith in Jesus. By staying connected to the vine, he was able to lead a movement that sought equality, dignity, and justice for all people. His commitment to nonviolence, even in the face of violence, bore incredible fruit—leading to the Civil Rights Act and inspiring generations to continue the fight for justice.
* Another example is **Mother Teresa**, who spent her life serving the poorest of the poor in Calcutta. She didn’t seek to elevate herself, but instead, she sought to elevate the dignity of those society had forgotten. Because of her deep connection with the vine, her ministry of love and service inspired countless others to see Christ in the face of the poor and to care for those in need. Hospitals, orphanages, and shelters were established in her name, and her legacy of selfless love continues to shape the Church today.
* On a community level, we can look to **Desmond Tutu** and the work of the **Truth and Reconciliation Commission** in South Africa. After the end of apartheid, Tutu led a process that wasn’t about revenge or self-glorification, but about forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation—helping to bring a fractured nation toward healing. His connection to Christ’s call for forgiveness and justice bore fruit in the form of national healing and paved the way for reconciliation that many thought impossible.
* The positive outcomes of these examples are clear: **justice is pursued, the poor are served, the wounds of a nation are healed, and communities are restored.**
* All of this happens because individuals and communities rooted themselves in Christ’s love and allowed that love to flow through them into the world.
* **This shift from self-elevation to true connection** is what allows us to be the Church that our communities desperately need.
* It enables us to engage with the people around us—not as competitors or as people to impress—but as a community ready to serve.
* When we embody this humility, we respond to the needs of the world in a deeper, more transformative way.
* **Mother Teresa**, once said:

*"Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love."*

* When we are connected to the vine, it’s not about grand achievements or personal glory.
* It’s about allowing the love of Christ to flow through us in every act of service, no matter how small, so that we can bear fruit that brings healing and hope to the world around us.
* May we, as a Church, embrace that call together. Amen.