Sunday November 10, 2024

First Lesson: John 15:5

Gospel Lesson: Mark 12 : 28-44

Sermon Series: Connections: Authenticating Connections

Preacher: Kirstie J. 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, **Authentic Connections.**
* The heartbeat of this series is to ask: How can we be sure that the connections we cultivate with one another—and with God—are genuinely real?
* If I can be open with you this morning, **it feels like our world is in a constant state of tension, especially in the wake of this recent election season.**
* Regardless of where any of us may stand politically, there’s a shared sense that it’s getting harder to **recognize which connections in our lives are steady and authentic, and which may not be.** Can I speak candidly with you this morning?
* **This search for real, enduring connections**—those we can count on, those that nourish us—feels more important now than ever.
* Somehow, through all of this—through the tension, the uncertainty, and the challenges we face in connecting meaningfully—we are also invited to invest in something greater than our immediate circumstances. We’re invited to find and build our grounding in a connection that is truly stable, and that invitation comes directly from Christ in John 15:5.
* Here, Jesus calls us into a relationship that’s not fleeting or conditional but enduring and life-giving. *“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit.”*
* This connection to the vine is unlike any other connection we experience.
* But that raises a question: **How can we be certain of the authenticity of this vine? How do we know that we are truly connected to something real, something unshakeable?**
* Jesus presents himself as the true vine, **yet we live in a world full of competing vines—connections and relationships that may look promising but may not be truly life-giving or lasting.**
* In considering Mark 12:38-44 alongside John 15:5, we find a powerful conversation between authentic and superficial connections and are reminded of the criteria Jesus sets for true relationship with God and neighbor.
* In Mark 12:38-44, Jesus first warns the crowd about the scribes, who act religious but lack genuine devotion.
* *“Beware of the scribes,”* he says, *“who like to walk around in long robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces.”* They seek honor and prestige, but their actions reveal self-interest rather than self-giving.
* Their “connection” to God is shallow, more about appearances than true relationship.
* They want the benefits of social status without the deeper sacrifice or humility required by the love of God and neighbor.
* **Immediately following this, we encounter the poor widow**.
* As Jesus watches people put money into the temple treasury, he observes that many wealthy individuals contribute large sums, but it’s the widow who catches his attention.
* She offers two small coins—all she has to live on. Jesus remarks that she has given more than the others, saying, *“They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.”*
* This widow’s action embodies the true connection Jesus calls us to—**a connection that is whole-hearted and rooted in trust, not based on what can be spared but on what can be fully given.**
* She models what Jesus describes in John 15:5, where connection to the vine requires us to be fully invested, fully committed, and entirely trusting in God’s provision.
* In our *Wednesday Night Applying the Sermon to Life* class, we discussed the stark contrast here: the scribes present a superficial connection—**one that is performative and self-centered, seeking public affirmation rather than true connection with God.**
* The widow, however, models an authentic connection. Her sacrifice is quiet and unnoticed by many, yet it reflects a profound trust in God.
* She gives her all, showing that her connection to God is genuine, humble, and marked by love.
* Our takeaway as a class was that **real, authentic connections can be felt in their depth and stability.**
* They are connections rooted in love, sustained by trust, and fortified by shared purpose.
* **Real, authentic connections** are life- giving——not soul sucking.
* **They are connection**s that produce patience, forgiveness, resilience, and joy!…Hallelujah!

# Reflecting on a recent experience at the United Women in Faith Meeting yesterday, I listened to Bryan Seck, executive director from the Lincoln Literacy organization located on 10th and Lincoln Mall.

* Lincoln Literacy’s mission is to strengthen the community by teaching English literacy and other essential skills to people from diverse backgrounds.
* This organization fosters connections across cultural, social, and language barriers, providing a space where people from all walks of life learn alongside one another, regardless of their differences.
* **Lincoln Literacy** serves a diverse and growing population in Lincoln, Nebraska.
* In 2023, the organization assisted 1,663 adult learners, a 50% increase from 2022 and a 90% increase from 2021.
* These students hailed from 76 different countries and territories, reflecting the city's multicultural landscape.
* The student population was 62% female and 38% male, with 60% living at or below the federal poverty level; notably, 26% reported a family income of less than $10,000.
* Lincoln Literacy offered over 100 classes six days a week, with 76% of students advancing by at least one proficiency level. The organization also engaged 185 volunteers, 79 of whom were new, achieving a 98% volunteer satisfaction rate.
* One poignant point Bryan shared with us was the unique challenge and beauty of bringing together people with vastly different cultural practices and beliefs, including views on gender roles and community.
* **Despite these differences, they come together with a common goal: learning English to better navigate life in this country.**
* It’s a testament to authentic connection—one where people put aside differences, embracing a shared purpose that transcends cultural boundaries.
* This example from Lincoln Literacy is a powerful example to the Church that reminds us that **authentic connections aren’t about uniformity or shared backgrounds; they are about shared commitment and mutual respect.**
* In our workplaces, communities, and church, we too are called to create spaces **where differences are not only accepted but valued.**
* Authentic connections are built when we engage sincerely, **putting aside preconceptions, and come together in humility and respect.**
* This is how we model the true connection of the vine—**by joining in a shared mission, grounded in love and understanding, so that we can grow and bear fruit together.**
* Therefore, **let’s carry forward the work of building authentic connections within our church and beyond.**
* Last Sunday, 35 members of our community—children included—gathered to dream about how we can continue living into the *beloved community* we strive to be.
* This vision is rooted in being community-centered, focused, and determined to share God's love inclusively and expansively.
* It’s about living our faith through action, as we already have with Maternal Wellness programs, Youth and Women’s Empowerment programs, and more.
* It’s about re-committing to the mission of justice, addressing pressing community needs: expanding accessibility to pretrial diversion programs, advocating for affordable housing, and securing mental health resources for all. **This work embodies authentic connection, where compassion and purpose intersect.**
* **Moreover, it’s about re-energizing our commitment to fight hunger and poverty**, sustaining partnerships with initiatives like Heifer International, and stepping up to serve in roles within our church to maintain and grow our traditions of service.
* As we open our doors and hearts, we embrace the transitions of church life, celebrating those joining **us and calling Lincoln First home.**
* **This work of connection—real, authentic connection—is a call to continue Christ’s love in action.**
* Together, let’s remain rooted in the vine, bearing fruit that will transform our church, our community, and beyond.
* Let’s go forth in faith, connected and committed, to live as a *beloved community* that reflects God’s love in every way….Amen!

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