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The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost – August 8, 2021
Ephesians 4:25-5:2

Holy Spirit of God, may the refining fire of your love reach into our hidden, inmost places and make us one spirit with you. Amen.

Few things bring me more joy than those surprising encounters with strangers that reveal connection. I receive such satisfaction when I've simply bothered to chat with a stranger – whether in line at the grocery store, passing on the sidewalk while walking the dog, or with a waiter at a restaurant. I like to feel connected to people that I encounter throughout my day – it makes me feel more alive, more human.

I am an intensely loyal person. Once I find a hairdresser, a restaurant, a landscaper, or any other number of people that make my life more enjoyable, I tend to stick with them. Before I moved to Northern Virginia, I saw the same hair stylist for 14 years. I visited with Marlo for an hour and half every five weeks for all those years and followed her from salon to salon. I knew the ups and downs of her life and family. I knew how she grew up and the challenges she faced. She accompanied me through my transition from a career in software development to seminary to the priesthood. And while we were never friends outside of the salon, she even attended my ordination!

But recently, I have come to realize that my motivation is about more than mere loyalty. I desire connection and on-going relationship with the people that are part of my life. I enjoy going to Angie's and talking with the same waitresses every week. I like that the ladies at the nail salon across the street greet me by name. I enjoy chatting with the checkers at the Safeway and asking how their day is going and knowing that they recognize me. I appreciate encounters such as these not because they make me feel important, but rather because they make me feel connected in the world and more human. I enjoy tipping well both because I know these people and because it is yet another sign of how we and our wellbeing are interdependent. I sense the great web of humanity and my place – however minor – in it.

When I am perfunctorily asked at the check-out line, "How are you today?", I try to make an effort to stop digging in my purse and to look at the cashier and say, "Fine, thank you. How are *you* doing today?" Often enough, I find that what ordinarily would have been an obligatory transactional exchange transforms into a real – if only momentary – human encounter. I want to recognize the humanity of the person in front of me, and in doing so, I feel more fully human myself.

One never knows what can come of chance encounters like this. I have learned the most surprising and esoteric facts; discovered remarkable life connections with complete strangers; and forged joyfully unexpected friendships with folks entirely different from myself. Talking to strangers can lead to the realization that perhaps we are less strange to each other than we think.

This week, I read an interesting article in *The Atlantic* about just this issue. Not surprisingly, a large body of research has found that an overwhelmingly strong predictor of happiness and well-being is the quality of a person's social relationships. These studies have largely focused on only close ties: family, friends, co-workers. In the past 15 years, however, researchers have begun to wonder if interacting with strangers couldn't also affect our well-being. And it turns out that studies repeatedly show that talking with strangers can make us happier, more connected to our communities, mentally sharper, healthier, less lonely, and more trustful and optimistic. Study subjects were surprised to learn that encounters with strangers provides reassurance that there is goodness in the world and the possibility of belonging.

In one study, in particular, researchers asked a group of adults to chat with the barista when they got their morning coffee. They had the idea that by not engaging with counter workers – by essentially treating them as service robots and not, say, actual human beings – we may be denying ourselves a potential “hidden source of belonging and happiness.” And they were correct. The participants who talked with their barista reported feeling a stronger sense of community and an improved mood, as well as a greater satisfaction with their overall coffee-buying experience. And this is only reporting the results from the customer’s point of view. I can only imagine what a difference they made in the baristas’ day!

Another researcher looking into this issue said he was inspired, in part, by the notion that “it’s fundamentally dehumanizing to be surrounded by people and then never interact and engage with them.” The author of the article elaborated: “It’s dehumanizing to me because I lose an opportunity to be a social being – which is my nature – and it’s dehumanizing to the stranger because I never experience more than a superficial glimpse of their full humanity”.

That is a theological statement. It is dehumanizing to me because I am not living a fully human life and it is dehumanizing to the stranger because I deny their humanity. And if I am not living a fully human life – a life made in the image of God and lived within the connectedness of the Body of Christ – I will not find accessible the living bread of eternal life. I may have goodness in my life, but this manna perishes, and I will continue to be hungry and thirsty.

Our lesson from Ephesians touches on this issue. In the first verse, the author writes, “let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.” At first glance, this may strike us as idealistic, hyperbolic, or scary. Always speak the truth, why would we risk such a thing? The author insists that we need to speak truth because we actually are all part of one another. It would seem that without truth, authentic community fails.

But what is this truth that we are to speak? Is it merely the inverse of falsehood? Is it as simple and clumsy as always speaking exactly what you think and feel, no matter how unpleasant or mean-spirited? I doubt that very much. The author of Ephesians seems to be saying that the “truth” that we should be speaking with each other is that which reveals our connectedness, our community, our membership of one another. This truth we are to share with our neighbors is that which does not dwell in anger and resentment; that which gives and builds up others, rather than takes from and tears down; that which is kindhearted, forgiving, and merciful, as God in Christ has demonstrated.

With Jesus as our model of speaking truth, I think we can reframe this imperative as “speak love to our neighbors”. If love reveals truth – the truth of our interconnectedness, the truth of God’s love for us; the truth of the holiness of our love for each other – then love and truth are two sides of the same theological coin. The practice of kindness and encounter of our neighbor – speaking love to each other – draws one away from hardness of heart and into the life of God. And this life, as the doctrine of the Trinity demonstrates, is understood as relationship; belonging; communion.

Let all of us speak love to our neighbors. Understanding Paul’s first sentence this way, then leads us directly to the last sentence in our lesson – the one with the big takeaway: “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” We are called to imitate God not only because in doing so, we develop and make robust within us the Godly virtues, but also because it is in our truest nature to do so. To live fully human lives, is to live out the image of God impressed deep within us. When we do, we will find that we naturally protect and deepen authentic community, as that is the very essence of God. We live into our God-given identities and recognize our connectedness and interdependence upon each other – and God.

Perhaps that last sentence of our Ephesians lesson sounds familiar to you. Charles and I usually recite a version of it at the offertory at each service of Holy Eucharist: “Walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us an offering and sacrifice to God.” This translation from our

prayer book replaces “live in love” with “walk in love”. While I prefer the more universal application of “live in love”, walk in love suggests the element of intentional action – of consistent and purposeful practice.

Please understand I’m not suggesting that we are fully imitating Christ when we chat with the cashier for a few moments at the Safeway. There is much more than that to the imperatives to “live in love, as Christ loved us” and “speak truth to our neighbors” – these are radical calls to living a life completely transformed by God’s love. I am, however, saying, that a first tentative step in this journey of transformation might just be developing the practice of greeting and engaging the human beings we encounter throughout our daily life. Be willing to develop a sense of wonder and inquiry about others. Give them your full attention – if only for a few moments – and ask about their day. Inquire about their lives. Acknowledge the humanity of the person before you. You may be surprised to realize that the seemingly insubstantial gift of your attention turns out to be a gift of love. And the lived revelation of our connectedness and shared humanity, may indeed reveal the bread of life and cup of salvation.

Amen.