

Connections

I am going to start with a page or so written by the magnificent, holy, gift-from-God Richard Rohr. You will be hearing the punch line at the beginning. Then you will hear some words from me which you will know is not him. Then I will end with more shake up your soul words from him. This means you have to concentrate extra hard at the beginning and the end. This also means no peeking at cell phones or sneaking to the frig in the middle. That is because this topic is so extraordinarily important, especially in these days of division, dismay, disagreement and darkness. Got it? OK! The theme throughout is connectivity. Here's Richard:

“Remember, *light is not so much what you directly see as that by which you see everything else*. This is why in John's Gospel, Jesus Christ makes the almost boastful statement ‘I am the Light of the world’...Jesus Christ is the amalgam of matter and spirit put together in one place, so we ourselves can put it together in all places and enjoy things in their fullness. It can even enable us to see as God sees, if that is not expecting too much.

Scientists have discovered that what looks like darkness to the human eye is actually filled with tiny particles called ‘neutrinos,’ slivers of light that pass through the entire universe. Apparently, there is no such thing as total darkness anywhere, even though the human eye thinks there is. John's Gospel was more accurate than we realized when it described Christ as ‘a light that darkness cannot overcome.’...Knowing that the inner light of things cannot be eliminated or destroyed is deeply hopeful. And as if that is not enough, John's choice of an active verb (*The true light...was coming into the world*) shows us that the Christ mystery is not a one time event, but an ongoing process throughout time—as

constant as the light that fills the universe. And ‘God saw that light was good,. Hold on to that!

My point is this: When I know that the world around me is both the hiding place and the revelation of God, I can no longer make a significant distinction between the natural and the supernatural, between the holy and the profane...everything I see and know is indeed one ‘*uni-verse*,’ revolving around one, coherent center. **This Divine Presence seeks connection and communion, not separation or division—except for the sake of an even deeper future union.”**

OK. Now me. Let’s bring this cognitive/cosmic pondering down to the every day. But we will be saying the same thing in a different way. Have you ever taken a moment to reflect on just how interconnected we all are? From the time we get up in the morning and connect in some way with the small, small world to the time we go to sleep—and while we sleep—we are intricately connected with women and men in the next room, around the corner and around the globe. The food we eat for breakfast and throughout the day is brought to us by a cast of hundreds who touch our lives. Just think of all the farmers, laborers, packers, processors, distributors, truckers, stock boys, saleswomen, cashiers, inspectors and marketers that work “together and apart.” The clothes we wear—just look at the labels—are designed one place, sewn in another, shipped to another, sold in another. The cars we drive have been designed, manufactured, delivered and sold by an ever increasingly complex web of international corporations. The offices at which we work, the schools in which we study, the hospitals in which we are healed: all of these function, or don’t function, based on connections. The water in our bay begins as a stream a thousand miles away. The air we breathe is tainted or purified by workers, farmers, campers, corporations and environmentalists we will

never meet. Beyond that which we can consume one look at the morning paper will assure us that not only the goods but also the actions around the world impact us personally every day. It is quite remarkable to reflect on just how globally interdependent we are.

Shift gears for a moment. Leave the images of our small, connected planet, and think just of your own connections. Think of the emotional, spiritual and even physical impact of being positively connected—or not! Think of the moments in your life when you feel the most connected. Are you part of a healthy, close-knit family, one that accepts you as you are, that encourages you to be all that you can be? Have you ever had a best friend? Have you ever had a loving, significant other? Have you been part of a sorority, a neighborhood, a team? Have you ever felt really connected to a worship community? How does it feel to be connected? What goes on inside of you when you feel close to those around you?

On the other hand, what does it feel like when you do not feel connected, or when you lose your connection? How dependent are you, are we, on a multitude of electronic connections? TV? Radio? Internet? Facebook? Twitter? Zoom? Smart phone? Stupid phone? We are dramatically wired and wireless. Just think of how you feel when your computer screen goes black or your phone dies. Go beyond all your gadgets. Consider your personal relationships. What happens inside of you when there is an estrangement in your family, when you and your best friend really argue, when you and the one you love separate? What does that feel like? Have you ever moved and been unable to connect with those in your new city? How do you feel when you walk into a room where everyone else except you has been to the same party the night before, or at least act as if they have? And what about a faith community? Have you ever felt unwelcomed, excluded, disconnected? How does it feel? Why is it that we seek connection, relationship, community?

All of these reflections, reflections on the interconnectedness of our world and on our own moments of knowing we are part of a relationship or a community, lead us to explore one of the most interesting truths of our Judeo Christian heritage. Our God is a God of relationship. Our God is a God of covenant. Our Trinitarian God is innately relational. Verse after verse, chapter after chapter, book after book, Scripture is about relationship—good and bad, holy and unholy, divine and anything but. Our God is a God of the good and the holy and the committed kind of relationship. Our God is a God of covenant. Our Trinitarian God is innately relational. The God revealed to us in the life of Jesus is a God of community and communion. The Ten Commandments are about relationship. The beatitudes are about relationship. The Bible speaks of the beauty and peace of being connected to a loving God, to others and to the truth within you. It also speaks of the misery and existential loneliness and sense of exile of being disconnected from all of them. Jesus said it in the poignant fourteenth chapter of John. He knows he is leaving his disciples. There will be an inevitably painful dis-connect. Jesus explains that, between the time he leaves and the time he returns, those he leaves behind must stay connected. If they do not, if they did not, there would be no church. If they do not, if they did not, we would not be gathered today. And to explain this to them he does not take them aside and talk to them one by one. He talks to them as a group. Say the things I said, he tells them. Do the things I did, he tells them. And I will send a spirit to be with you to comfort you, to help you, to unite you.

Jesus speaks of a perfect, total yet mystical union when he says: “On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” Paul also explains that in the in-between-time, in the time between the Resurrection and the return, we must function as the body of Christ. He presents an amazing image of believers as hands, feet, eyes, ears, heart, muscle all functioning in harmony, in

rhythm, in concert. Given these truths, then, of the undeniable interconnectivity of life on this planet, of the peace and joy we feel when we are connected to God, to others, to community, to self, and of the biblical affirmation of these truths, I want to ask you to reflect on these questions. What does this tell us about the nature of God? What does this tell us about the way we should live our lives? If God is essentially a God of relationships and connections, why is it so often hard for us to relate and to connect? What prevents us from connecting? And what and who are our models for connecting?

Obviously, for Christians, the model is Jesus. But Jesus provides models for community dramatically different from prevailing models of his day. “Rather than shaping his followers into the usual hierarchy of power, (an order that elevated tyrants and kings, patriarchs and bullies, the wealthy and the well-connected), Jesus constituted his community around power turned upside down.” It is upside down because it offers very different models of authority. It is upside down because it values and engages the disenfranchised, because it goes out on the street and proactively includes the poor, the rejected, the blind, the leper, the outcast, the dirty—all of those who, for whatever reason, are just not in, are just not well-connected. In fact, they are not connected at all!

Larry Rasmussen traces these egalitarian modes to Judaism, to a covenant with God, to an embracing of “...imperatives to redress social inequities, protect the vulnerable, and keep the power of privilege in check...” This is a model of proactively creating compassionate connections; this is a model of community activism and service to those in need. This is a model based on behaving as God, the God with whom you are in relationship, wants you to behave. Here the emphasis is on service, on mutuality, on cooperation, on constructive resolution of inevitable disagreements.

You have heard me say it over and over. Drug addicts need to be treated. Students need to learn. Homeless persons need homes. Hungry people need food. It is in serving them, in following Jesus by turning power upside down, that we not only connect with them but that we actively seek to return them to community. For each of them, in turn, has the capacity to experience the growth, the belief in self-worth, the joy and the deep satisfaction that result from serving others. This brings us back to that perfect image of the body of Christ. Understanding that we are functioning as Christ, that God is working through that body, provides us with a worldview that "...makes room for the exercise of a variety of ways to care for one another and the world." This mutuality of care is essential; the "radical inclusivity" advocated by Jesus means viewing all others in our community as having worth, as having the capacity to be healed and to, in turn, serve others.

But it goes beyond that. It reaches from the city to the suburbs and beyond. The isolated need to be connected. The affluent need to be educated. The arrogant must learn humility. Those who make war need to learn peace. The work to which we are called, the work of connecting, of relating, of building communities, of becoming the body of Christ on earth is the hardest work there is. And the startling fact is that God uses us to do it! It is in the doing, the creating, the connecting, the building of community that we become who God intends us to be. And it is in the tearing down, the bad-mouthing, the maligning, the excluding, the mistreating and the persecution of those not in our insular, privileged communities that we become who God told us, and showed us, that we should never be. And this, in Scripture, has a name. Sin.

Let me say it as clearly as I can. We are commanded to connect. When you see folks doing the work of bringing people together they are doing God's work. When you see people trying their very manipulative, deceitful best to tear people

apart they are not doing God's work. The very heart of Jesus' message is to love the Lord with all our hearts and minds and souls. It doesn't stop there. We are to love others. We are to love ourselves. Rasmussen wrote that this was not easy to do in the time of Jesus. He described that time as "...diverse, cosmopolitan, multilingual, multiracial, multicultural, multi-religious, fragmented, eclectic, riddled by extremes of all kinds, and more than a little violent." Sound familiar?

Community building in this context is, indeed, spiritual and actual work! It means that we must change our mental images and models of all of those with whom we are called to be in community. We must change how we see, how we perceive. We cannot demonize. We cannot dismiss entire countries and religions as evil. If we see them that way, if we dehumanize them, we will feel perfectly comfortable not just excluding them but also abusing them, humiliating them, eliminating them. That kind of behavior is absolutely, unequivocally opposed to Christian teaching. Jesus sacrificed his life to oppose that kind of evil. From the time we exit the womb we depend on the hands and hearts and minds of other

I believe that, at the moment of birth, there is a dramatic act of disconnection when the cord is cut. It is an acutely physical and real act; it is also powerfully symbolic. And when I witnessed this when my grandchildren were born this was my thought: perhaps birth is a temporary disconnect from the Ultimate Source of our being and death is a return to that Source. Perhaps the haunting feeling of not quite being whole is a result of that loss. If that is the case, then our in-between-time is filled with a longing for what was severed, with a profound desire to reconnect. And so Jesus promises that through him we are joined to the eternal womb and to others who feel as we feel, who search as we search. And that is why he said to those who so feared the coming disconnect "...I am in my Father, and

you in me, and I in you.” This is his promise. This is our truth. And you cannot be any more connected than that.

And now back to Rohr for the ending which is a beginning: “The freeing, good news of the Gospel is that God is saving and redeeming the Whole first and foremost, and we are all caught up in this Cosmic Sweep of Divine Love. The parts—you and me and everybody else—are the blessed beneficiaries, the desperate hangers-on, the partly willing participants in the Whole. Paul wrote that our only task is to trust this reality ‘until God is all in all.’ What a different idea of faith! ‘When Christ is revealed’ Paul writes to the Colossians, ‘and he is your life—you too will be revealed in all your glory with him.’ Unless and until we can enjoy this, so much of what passes for Christianity will amount to little more than well-disguised narcissism and self-referential politics. We see this phenomenon playing out in the de-facto values of people who strongly identify as Christian. Often they are more racist, classist, and sexist than non-Christians. ‘Others can carry the burden and the pain of injustice, but not my group,’ they seem to say.

Once I know that all suffering is both our suffering and God’s suffering, I can better endure and trust the desolations and disappointments that come my way. I can live with fewer comforts and conveniences when I see my part in global warming. I can speak with a soft and trusting voice in the public domain if doing so will help lessen human hatred and mistrust. I can stop circling the wagons around my own group, if doing so will help us recognize our common humanity.

If I can recognize that all suffering and crucifixion...is ‘one body’ and will one day be transmuted into the ‘one body’ of cosmic resurrection...I can at least live without going crazy or being permanently depressed. In this same

passage, Paul goes on in this verse to say that ‘God will do this by the same power...by which he is transforming the whole universe.’ It is all one continuous movement for him...Our full ‘Christ Option’—and it is indeed a free choice to jump on board—offers us so much that is both good and new—*a God who is in total solidarity with all of us at every stage of the journey, and who will get us all to our destination together in love.* **It is no longer about being correct. It is about being connected. Being in right relationship is much, much better than just trying to be ‘right.’”**

Amen. Reverend Sharon Smith. The Gathering of Baltimore. July 26th, 2020 All quotes from Richard Rohr are from *The Universal Christ*.