

Imagine a Church sermon series
#1 – Connecting People to God and Each Other
Sept. 12, 2021
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On August 31, 2014, we held a historic congregational meeting right after church to vote on a new Vision and Mission Statement presented to us by our Strategic Planning Team. The team had worked for months gathering information, conducting interviews, and prayerfully discerning who God was calling Crestwood to be. Out of that process came a vision statement, which gave us a goal to reach for, and a mission statement, which illuminated the pathway of how to get to that goal. The next Sunday, we started the work of living out those statements.

That was seven years ago, so it's time for us to step back and see how we're doing. We actually started this process last March but, you know, COVID. So we're starting again to evaluate how faithfully we've lived out our mission and vision statements. Starting today, Trish and I will preach on those statements, and we'll follow up with a survey sent to your email, giving you a chance to tell our Strategic Planning Team how well you think this congregation has done honoring who God called us to be seven years ago. Are we there? What have we done well? Where have we fallen short? Do these statements still resonate with us or is God calling us to something new? We'll spend some time imagining a church that looks like the best version of Crestwood and then talk about where we are on that journey. Today, we start with our vision statement: Connecting people to God and each other.

Remember that time when we all had to stay in our houses and not go out anywhere because we were afraid we'd get the Coronavirus? That was terrible, wasn't it? It was such a horrible feeling to be stuck in a confined space with nowhere to go. I remember how excited I was to go on vacation to the patio. That was such a hard time of isolation, especially for those of us who love to talk and connect and build relationships, what my wife Amy calls "running for the Mayor of Nothing."

As your church staff, we worked harder than ever during that time to give this congregation a way to worship, to study, to spend time together. But it's hard to build a relationship with a box on a screen, and it's a much different and less fulfilling feeling to worship on your couch than in a pew surrounding by your church family (although some of you may miss the ability to hit the "mute" button). When I talked with people, the dominant word for how they felt was "disconnected."

It's kind of hard to be a church that connects people to God and each other when our primary source of connection is taken away from us. How do you connect with each other when doing so might make you or the other person sick? Can you truly connect with someone when they keep forgetting to unmute themselves on Zoom? Is that connection genuine when you can't tell if they are smiling or sticking their tongue out at you because you're both wearing masks? COVID has fundamentally changed what it means to connect to God and each other because the ways we used to do this have been compromised.

But that connection is so important, so essential to who we are as human beings and as the pinnacle of God's creation. In Genesis 1, when God is making this world, shaping the hippopotamuses and the rhododendrons and the stalactites, God calls it all good. In fact, there's only one thing that God says is not good. Genesis 2:18 says, "Then the LORD God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.'" The only thing that

wasn't good about creation was that the first human had no partner. We were made for connection, to be in relationship with each other.

We see that played out over and over again in scriptures. I said last week that when we humble ourselves before God, God makes us more than ourselves. To connect with someone else is a humbling act, willingly giving a part of ourselves to someone else in order to be woven together in relationship. Abraham and Sarah. Jonathan and David. Ruth and Naomi. Jesus as his disciples. The Bible is full of examples of people connecting in live-giving ways, people who find themselves in the midst of their relationship with someone else.

I think that's the grand search we all are on: to find ourselves. We ask, "Who am I?" then spend our lives looking for the answer. When Jesus asks his potential disciples in John's gospel, "What are you looking for?" I believe they are looking for themselves. Others have seen them in negative ways – lower class, blue-collar, manual laborers, riff raff. They wanted to know themselves in a deeper, more existential way and they believed Jesus could show them the way.

And what Jesus shows them is even greater than they could have imagined. Yes, Jesus helps them to find themselves, but he does so by showing them who they are in God's eyes, not riff raff, but children of God. Time and time again, Jesus connects them to the Great I AM, the God who made and loved them. "You are the salt of the earth." "You are the light of the world." "You are ones who will do my work after me." By connecting his disciples to God, Jesus helps them find themselves, to see who they truly are. As Diana Butler Bass says, "God's being and human beings are intimately related."

"Connecting people to God and each other." Church should be the place where that interconnectedness is rediscovered, strengthened, as used as the baseline for understanding our infinite worth. That's what happened for me. When I was in college, searching for myself, struggling to forge my identity, my mom said, "I think you'd like our church. Come and see." She didn't beg or bribe or threaten to ground me. "Come and see." So I went. I found people like Rick Burch and Joanne Robbins and Don and Joan Allen who accepted me and helped me take the next step in my faith journey. I found a God who loved me for who I was but called me to be something greater. And ultimately, I found myself, connecting to God in ways that redefined me.

But our vision statement doesn't say we only connect people to God. In some ways, that's the easy part. There's this little monkey wrench called "other people" that we have to throw into the mix. We can't just be in relationship with God. We still have to buy groceries and call customer service and pass the communion trays. So not only should the church connect people to God, but it must also foster connections between and among people. Ah, now it starts to get tricky, because those connections don't always work, do they? I mean, I love being in relationship with other people, at least until they do or say something that really honks me off, which happens about every day. Then it's a lot easier to sever that connection and go back inside, to forgo the hard work of being connected to others.

That has been made infinitely harder during COVID. We can still connect with God while quarantined, but isolation is the antithesis of connection. If only connecting with other people were as easy as clicking a Zoom link. That may connect us virtually, but it doesn't connect us at a soul level. That kind of connection happens through a hug or over coffee or discovering shared stories or reading scripture together. And we haven't been able to do that safely. I believe that as our connection to each other has weakened, so has our connection to God, because the primary way many of us experience God is through the "not-aloneness" of being together.

So, the question I've been wrestling with and praying about is, "Does this vision still fit us?" And if so, how do we do that when we now have three congregations – our 8:30 service folks, our 10:45 service folks, and our online folks? Trish and I can plan all kinds of programs and classes and studies, but that's not what helps people connect to God and each other, because that's not up to us. We can lead people to the life-giving water of Jesus Christ, but we can't make them drink it. To live out this vision, we need to remember what it means to be the church. Back when we were shut down, I had several people lament to me about the church being closed. But the church never closed. Because the church is not defined by walls and pews and doors.

Butler Bass says, "The church is not an institution, an organization, or a building, but a community of relationships where people's selves are with God and with one another, bound by love." If God is love, as the Bible tells us, and we are made in the image of God, then we are made to show that Godly love. And, as theologian Emil Brunner says, "Love can only operate in community, and only in loving can people be truly human." In other words, it's only when we act out the image of Godly love inside of us that we can truly know who we are and how we are connected.

We are still learning what connection looks like in the age of COVID. It certainly looks different than before. But some things haven't changed. We still need each other, to be "not alone" in this world. The ways we alleviate that aloneness may be different, but the truth of needing connection is still there. We are still the church, called into this world to shine our light into the darkness through our generosity and our presence and our willingness to humble ourselves for the sake of others. And what really hasn't changed is God. God is still God, still our creator, still the one calling us into relationship with God and each other.

There may come a time when we are able to go back to the way things were. Or, this may be the way the world is moving forward. The church has survived all kinds of cultural calamities and shifts in its history. If wars and plagues and bad rock music couldn't kill it, COVID doesn't stand a chance. But what the church has to do is change to fit the culture in which it exists. How and when and where we connect may be different, but our need for connection is still the same. And so is our God, who is still there, right there, walking with us and lamenting with us and logging on with us. So, please, keep showing up, logging on, Zooming in. We need you. We need each other. May our spirits continue to build our connection with God and each other, and may those connections remind us of the fundamental truth that we are not alone.