

Homily – Reclaiming Connection

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This past Sunday I was not with you here at church. I took the Sunday off, and Doug Edwards preached and presided. Thank you again, to Doug for sharing his voice. Instead of being here last week, I was preparing for a concert. Along with several others here at St. Barnabas I sing in the San Luis Obispo Master Chorale, and last Sunday afternoon we had a concert at the Cal Poly Performing Arts Center. The performance featured some of the sacred works of Ralph Vaughan Williams. Vaughan Williams is a British composer, and since we are an offshoot of the Church of England, we have twenty-seven hymns by this British composer in our Episcopal Hymnal. You sang some of them last week. The concert last Sunday afternoon was one of the best I have ever been part of, and I think there were several reasons for this stellar experience. First, the music was difficult, and we did it well. There was a sense of accomplishment at something well done. In addition the music was sacred and quite moving. The last anthem, Dona Nobis Pacem, which is Latin for give us peace, had several sections in which the words were based on the poetry of Walt Whitman. The progression of the music went from peace and calm, to the glory of war, to the horror of war, and finally back to peace again. This final peace was of the kingdom of God, and swords were beaten into plow shares. While Walt Whitman wrote the words in reference to the American Civil War, these same words are quite relevant to the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Many of us feel a connection to the people of Ukraine and this connection opens our hearts. This was probably why last Sunday felt so special, but I think there is still a primary reason, at least for me, that the experience was transcendent. On the stage we had eighty singers and forty people in the orchestra, and there was a deep sense of connection and union with the other performers. We were breathing together, and moving together. We were linked together in creating glorious music that made us feel that, together, we were standing on the threshold between here and eternity. This transcendent experience with one hundred and nineteen other people is one that I want to feel again, and it is one that I expect you would want to feel as well.

Now, I imagine that like me singing and music are one way that many of you have felt this connection to others. Or, maybe you have been on a sports team, and you had this union and connection with the other athletes. Or, maybe you and your lover have found a sense of union as you are together in very intimate ways. Or, you have experienced a beautiful sunset with another person and you feel a blending with them. Or, maybe you have been by yourself and you felt in union with the sunset itself, or maybe all of creation. There are many ways that we experience the divine, and I would even go so far as to say that we were created by God to experience transcendent union. For me, spirituality is all about connection, loving connection to

God, others, self, and rest of non-human creations. You and I were made to be connected, and much of our spiritual journey is about finding this connection, allowing these connections to happen more frequently, and consenting to the connections being longer in duration. Notice the verbs that I just used. I did not say make the connection happen or earn the connection. I said find, allow, and consent to unity that is our birth right. God made us to be connected, or put another way, the Christ that is in you is already connected to the Christ that is in and around all. We often miss this beauty. Christ is in you and in all other people as well, so what are you going to do about it?

Today's Gospel reading is at the conclusion of the Gospel of Jesus according to John. Some scholars consider it a tag on. They think it was written after the rest of the Gospel by someone other than John and appended. Be that as it may, we have a depiction of Jesus after his resurrection as he appeared to his disciples. While only male disciples were listed, we can be assured that even if the women weren't in the boat that day, they would have joined on the beach for the meal. In fact they were probably the ones who were on the beach tending the charcoal fire and cooking the fish and bread for the meal. And, after the meal Jesus speaks to Simon Peter in a way that is cathartic and healing. You may recall that as Jesus was being crucified, Simon Peter denies knowing Jesus. Maybe out of fear, three times Peter rejects Jesus, and flees the crucifixion. And, Peter's normal emotional reaction to these denials were getting in the way of his connection to the resurrected Jesus. And these blocking emotions are shame and guilt. Turning once again to Brené Brown's book "Atlas of the Heart" I want to take a moment to look at these two emotions and then connect them to our spiritual journeys.

Shame and guilt are related but not the same thing. Shame is a feeling that I am bad. The focus is on self, not behavior. The result is feeling flawed, and unworthy of love, belonging, and connection. Shame is not a driver of positive change. Guilt, however, is a feeling that I did something bad. The focus is on behavior. Guilt is the discomfort we feel when we evaluate our values against what we've done, or failed to do. Guilt can actually drive positive change and behavior. So, shame and guilt are not the same thing. And, here are a few more observations about shame. We all have it. Shame is universal and one of the most primitive emotions that we experience. And here is something else about shame. We are all afraid to talk about it. Sometimes we can feel shame when we just say the word "shame." But, it is getting easier as more people talk about shame. And here is a final thing about shame. The less we talk about it, the more control it has over us. Shame hates being spoken. When we hear the word "shame" our first thought is either, I have no idea what that means and I don't want to know, or I know exactly what that is and I don't want to talk about it. We can also make up that shame is what happens to other people, not us. But shame is in all of us. Here are a few examples. Shame is hiding the fact that I am in recovery. Shame is

raging at my kids. Shame is bankruptcy. Shame is getting laid off. Shame is hiding my sexuality. Shame is a DUI. Shame is infertility. Shame is not being able to throw a football. Shame is denying and rejecting Jesus three times and leaving him on the Cross. Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love, belonging, and connection.

The antidote to shame is connection along with love and belonging which are two expressions of connection. Connection is why we are here, and it is what gives purpose and meaning to our lives. The other antidote to shame is empathy. If we reach out and share our shame experience with someone who responds with empathy, then shame dissipates. Empathy is a hostile environment for shame. However, even before empathy self-compassion is the first step to healing shame. You are the beloved of God, and you were created with beauty and love. We can have more self-compassion if we practice self-kindness with more understanding towards ourselves. We can grow self-compassion when we practice mindfulness, that state in which we don't ignore our shame based pain, but instead look at it without judgement. And we can grow self-compassion when we see our common humanity. Self-compassion involves recognizing that suffering and personal inadequacy is part of the shared human experience, something that we all go through rather than being something that happens to me alone. Shared humanity also get back to what I said earlier. We have Christ in and around all of us. Self-compassion helps us move through shame, but then we need empathy from others as well for an important reason. Shame is a social emotion. Shame happens between people, and it heals between people. Even if I feel it alone, shame is the way I see myself through someone else's eyes. We need to be kind to ourselves, and then we can share our stories with someone else and receive empathy. When we minimize and eliminate shame, then we remove a common barrier to union. And two thousand years ago on the beach that day, Jesus names the three denials and rejection by Peter. He brings it into the open and says "follow me." Come back into my love. I do not reject you. I embrace you. Jesus frees Peter. Through empathy, Jesus helps Peter release his shame, that thing that gets in the way of connection and union.

You and I are also called to practice and share empathy. Empathy is an other-focused emotion. It draws our attention outward, toward the other person's experience. Shame and empathy are incompatible. Through empathy we feel connection. Through empathy we are the hands, and feet and voice of Jesus as we share God's love with others. Like Jesus' actions with Peter we too can free others. This morning we heard a second story of empathy in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Saul, who is also known as Paul, receives empathy from Ananias. Paul had been a significant persecutor of the early followers of Jesus, in fact, he took part in the stoning and death of Stephen. But then through his conversion, Paul is used by God as one of the major factors in the growth in the early church. God does not discard

Paul but transforms and heals his brokenness in a way that is in line with the eternal cycle of death and rebirth as Paul is healed from his old self and reborn in Christ. Ananias's empathy freed Paul from his shame.

Before I conclude today, I want to introduce the Japanese term "kintsugi" which literally means "golden joinery." Kintsugi is an artistic technique. Instead of hiding a flaw in a piece of broken pottery, the artist highlights and even celebrates the damage by repairing with a special lacquer that is dusted or mixed with gold, silver, or platinum. The restoration is more beautiful than the original precisely because of its repaired brokenness. Kintsugi is also a more general philosophy that understands breakage and repair as normal parts of human life. Instead of denying or hiding our faults and failures, we embrace our imperfections. In this Japanese aesthetic, the wear, tear, and damage on a physical object are marks of beauty to treasure and honor, not a reason to discard it. Kintsugi is a way of releasing shame. Instead of hiding brokenness we use it to build a new. This is what Jesus did on the beach that day, and this is what the Apostle Paul did after his conversion on the Road to Damascus.

When we overcome our shame and let go of our brokenness we are better able to join in the union with others which is our birthright. We were made to be connected to God, others, self, and the rest of non-human creation. We were made to experience that transcendent feeling that I had in last week's concert. But, the transcendent is not just in the glorious but also in the everyday. We connect to one another and Christ through our weekly Eucharist, the sharing of the bread and wine. If you look you will see the transcendent. Discard those things that separate us, and let yourself be in union with God.