

Lent 2025

Connections

The Congregational Church of Brookfield

Lenten Devotional Guide

Offered to you by:
The Deacons of CCB

“Connections”

Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their toil. ¹⁰ For if they fall, one will lift up the other, but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. ¹¹ Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? ¹² And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.
~Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

If you look up the word “connection” in the dictionary, the following are some of the definitions that you will find, among many others:

1. *an association; relationship;*
2. *a circle of friends or associates or a member of such a circle.*
3. *association with or development of something observed, imagined, discussed, etc.*
4. *a group of persons who are connected, as by political or religious ties.*

By any or all of these definitions, we can consider what we have built and are continuing to build here at the Congregational Church of Brookfield, as a community of faithful people doing our best to follow God, as a connection. And how important connections are, especially in **this** Lenten season, as we live in a country and a world that some might say are more connected than ever as we walk around with tiny computers (cell phones) in our pockets, can see what seemingly everyone on earth is doing via social media, and as we share opinions and thoughts so widely on the same. It may feel like we are connected and know something about so many. And yet we feel so separate, lonely, disjointed.

But those connections that really matter – the connections that know the real you (and love you just the same); the connections who will show up at your door with flowers when they haven’t seen you for a while or hear that you are down – or with chicken soup when you are sick; the connections who seek to move beyond partisanship and division and to work together to help bring healing to those places, spaces and people who are hurting in the world; the soul connections you feel when you have prayed for and with someone – perhaps offering a prayer shawl or a listening ear; those are the connections that are lasting, that are healing and helpful, that lead to opportunities to build real relationships and to serve others in the world. Those are the connections that are based on the foundation of our faith and our God – God who came into the world as flesh and blood to teach us – to teach us how to love, to teach us how to be authentic, to teach us how to build bridges and to work for justice, to teach us how to truly connect with those who are just like us and those who come from worlds away – even if they live right next door.

These are the connections we hope you seek, have the opportunity to reflect on as you read the following pages, and you find as we journey through Lent together. May we remember the words of the great poet Ecclesiastes when speaking about connections between people and God when he wrote, “a threefold cord is not quickly broken.” May we stay connected to the Source and to one another as we venture into this season – with gratitude to our Deacons and friends who helped compile this companion for the journey.

Pastors Bryn & Jennifer

How do you connect with God?

This year's Lenten Theme is Connections. There are many ways I connect with God. My personal favorite is through gratitude and expressing my gratitude daily in my journal. I feel like I have written and talked about my Gratitude Journals so many times before, so this year I write about other ways I connect with God.

Saying Grace has been an important act in our family. My husband and I started saying Grace before dinner when our boys came along. I had memories of saying Grace as a child with my parents. We felt it important to remember that food is a gift and a blessing from God. Let's not take food for granted and be thankful for all the people who help provide us food. Rodger and I still say Grace even when the boys can't join us for dinner.

Saying nightly prayers before bed is another way to connect with God. Take a moment before going to sleep to reflect on your day and see how God presented himself to you.

When the boys were born, I bought a book of prayers. I wasn't comfortable with the prayer I was taught as a kid (it said something along the lines of "if I die before I wake..."), so I was in search of a new one. I found this one:

Prayer:

Good night, dear God,

Now I must sleep

I close my eyes and slumber deep

I know you'll watch me from above

And cover me with your sweet love.

Amen

How do you connect with God? These are only a few ways that I do. Take a few minutes today for some self-reflection. Remember God is always with you.

Written by: Linae Wutzl

We Are Made for Connection

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow.

- Ecclesiastes 4:9-10

Whenever I spend time with my fellow Christians, I often feel rejuvenated. I believe this is the case due to experiencing the love and belonging God desires us to have with each other.

God intended us to do life together. This includes providing encouragement and support to each other and helping to pick each other up when the hard times knock us down. Undoubtedly, life has its fair share of difficulties, which can be downright heartbreaking at times. And, when we choose to do life on our own— which is usually done out of a lack of faith – we'll be much more vulnerable to the negative consequences of experiencing difficulties.

However, when we decide to trust in God by staying connected and open to God and our siblings in Christ, we're more able to endure life's struggles and reap the rewards that are promised to us. Some of these rewards include developing a stronger faith and knowing we are part of a family.

Life is a journey filled with both good times and bad times. These experiences are meant to test us and form us to be more like Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit. And, it is out of our love for God that we voluntarily offer the gifts that he has endowed us with to help out the church (God's family) and the world at large.

We must never forget that as children of God, we were not only made to be connected with each other but that we must actively seek to stay connected with one another in both the good and the bad times. Remembering and living by this truth will ensure that we reap the rewards that come with spending time with one another and the rewards that come with helping each other endure difficult times.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for welcoming me into your family. Thank you for the beautiful connections you have made in my life with my brothers and sisters of faith. I ask that you continue to work on my heart to make spending time with my family in Christ a priority so we could grow in Christ together and reap the fruits that you have promised us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Throughout This Day: Look back on all the times God has blessed you with the people in your life and how you have been used to being a blessing to others. Doing this will stir up joy and thankfulness in your heart for all the relationships God has blessed you with.

Source: Vincent Rizzo from www.thelife.com

Submitted by: Carol Ford Eagan, Marie Immohr and Leslie Sands

Honing our Connections

As iron sharpens iron, one person sharpens another.

~ Proverbs 27: 17

To sharpen a knife, it needs to rub against something hard. It will remain dull and get duller if it is not in contact with another hard object. This proverb reminds us that we need each other to stay sharp. We need to spend time together sharing our questions and our understandings so that we keep everyone sharp.

We can share our questions about scripture lessons to gain a better understanding of others' interpretation of those lessons – sharpening our understanding of scripture.

We can share our understanding of global events and how we can live our faith to strengthen our commitment to the teachings of Jesus - sharpening our understanding of consequences in the world of politics.

Just as the metal of a knife must rub up against another, we need to rub up against each other. By connecting in fellowship, we can iron out differences and seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit to lead us in the way of peace – sharpening our Christian connections to strengthen our faith.

Proverbs 12:26 says the righteous choose their friends carefully, but the way of the wicked leads them astray. Let us sharpen each other so that we are with fellow believers, who will not lead us in the way of the wicked.

Prayer: *Holy Spirit, we pray that you will guide us in ways to sharpen our faith and fellowship so that we work together to serve Jesus, our Lord and Savior.*

Written by: Ruth Reda

What Does the Bible Say About Connection?

The Bible has many stories and teachings about connection. It reminds us that we are not meant to be alone. We need others in our lives to help us, support us, and love us. Connection is like a thread that ties people together. It is what makes a family strong and what builds friendships. When we have a deep connection with someone, we are there for each other in good times and bad.

The Bible also teaches that connection goes beyond just people. It talks about how we need to connect with God. This connection is built through prayer, trust, and belief. Just like how we feel close to our friends when we talk to them, we grow closer to God when we talk to Him. It is a relationship that gives us strength and comfort.

In the Bible, connection is also about showing kindness and helping others. It reminds us that when we reach out to someone in need, we are building a connection that reflects love and care. Helping others is a way to bring people together, and it makes the world a better place.

So, the Bible encourages us to build strong connections with people and with God. These connections make our lives fuller and give us a sense of purpose. Whether it is a bond with family, friends, or God, connection is a key part of a meaningful life.

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ~ John 13:34

With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ~ Ephesians 4:2

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God has forgiven you. ~ Ephesians 4:32

You are not made to be alone, nor are you expected to live your walk with Jesus alone. ~ Hebrews 10:24-25

Share each other's burdens, and in this way obey the law of Christ. ~ Galatians 6:2

These verses emphasize that our connection with others is not just about shared joys but also shared burdens. Carrying each other's difficulties is an essential expression of love, fulfilling the command of Christ to love one another.

Prayer: *God, help us to remember that we are to live our lives connected to other people, both by living and sharing the teachings of Jesus, and that we should remain connected to You always through prayer.*

Source: Biblerepository.com

Submitted by: Marie Immohr

Connections: *From Temptation to Faith****Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16***

- ¹ You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
² will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust."
⁹ Because you have made the Lord your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place,
¹⁰ no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent.
¹¹ For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.
¹² On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.
¹³ You will tread on the lion and the adder; the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.
¹⁴ Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name.
¹⁵ When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble;
I will rescue them and honor them.
¹⁶ With long life I will satisfy them and show them my salvation.

Luke 4:1-13

- ⁴ Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ² where for forty days he was tested by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over he was famished. ³ The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." ⁴ Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"
⁵ Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And the devil said to him, "To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷ If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." ⁸ Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"
⁹ Then the devil led him to Jerusalem and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰ for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,'
¹¹ and
'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"
¹² Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" ¹³ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Don't Worry, Pray

Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.

~ Philippians 4:6-7

In these verses, Paul encourages believers to replace worry with prayer. By bringing our concerns to God and offering thanks for His faithfulness, we open ourselves up to His peace. This peace, which surpasses understanding, is the result of a deep connection with God through prayer, protecting our hearts and minds from anxiety.

Written by: Jim Eagan

God's Handiwork

Each time I see a rainbow
Or a nearby turtledove,
It serves as a memento
Of God's eternal love.

I feel His presence near me
On a quiet starlit night,
When the moon soars high above me
And gives off its magic light.

A garden tilled with flowers
Crossed by morning dew,
Remind me of His handiwork
And gives me strength anew.

A household filled with laughter
A child at mother's breast,
In times of strife a Friend for life
By these we all are blessed.

Source: Mary A. Summerline in *Graces: Prayers and Poems for Everyday Meals and Special Occasions*

Submitted by: Carol Ryan

Accepting help

"Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor."

~ Ecclesiastes 4:9

When my friend Susy offered to teach us how to fold old books into the shape of a heart, I couldn't wait. Once we got started, I discovered that the pattern was made up of faint lines and tiny numbers. My dreams of mastering paper-folding were replaced by memories of being the only visually impaired girl in my seventh-grade art class. I refused to give up on the project. I resolved that I would make a heart out of a book if it took all night.

Maybe I couldn't read the pattern, but I had a tableful of friends willing to help me. As desperately as I wanted to be able to say, "I can do it myself," my 20/200 vision said I needed the assistance of friends with better eyesight. I folded my last page to a round of applause. As I admired my heart-shaped book, I realized that I was able to complete the project in spite of my visual impairment because I persevered and was willing to accept help.

How many times have I had to ask for help in other areas of life, in situations more difficult than making a craft project? When God calls us to do what seems too difficult for us, we can learn to set aside our pride, pray for God's strength, and reach out to others for help. Through these experiences, we get to see the beauty of combining perseverance and humility.

Prayer: *Dear Lord, give us humility to ask for help when tasks are beyond us. Amen.*

Source: Jeannette Hanscomb in *The Upper Room*

Submitted by: Sue Boughton

The Connection We Crave

Jesus said, "... You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself"

~ Matthew 22:37-39

I was searching for an appropriate devotion for this year's Lenten Theme: Connections. I came across one written by Jennie Allen on March 9, 2022, called "The Connection We Crave" from Proverbs 3 ministries. Parts of it spoke to me, so instead of copying the entire devotion I thought I'd share my takeaways...

- We were built by God to be in meaningful relationships. "In fact, God existed in relationship with Himself before any of us were here. It's called the Trinity. God is one, and God is three. For all eternity, God has existed in relationship — as Father, Spirit and Son (Jesus)."
- We were built in the image of God. "We weren't just built for community; we were built because of it." This is why we crave healthy relationships with others and with God.
- We shouldn't look to others to fill what is missing in our lives. We should be looking to God. "...only a relationship with an eternal God can fill our hearts."

Jennie concluded with the following:

We make each other better. "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another." (Proverbs 27:17, NIV)

We remind each other of God and His plans for us. "... that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith." (Romans 1:12, NIV)

We fight for each other not to be distracted by sin. "But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." (Hebrews 3:13, ESV)

We need each other to live out the purposes of God. "... each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts ..." (Romans 12:5-6a, NIV)

Prayer: *God, thank you for creating us in your image and for the privilege to have a real relationship with you. Show us how the relationships we have with one another support us and you, Lord. In God's name we pray. Amen*

Source: "The Connection We Crave" from Proverbs 3 ministries, Jennie Allen March 9, 2022

Submitted by: Linae Wutzl

Cross-Cultural Connections

"I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb."

~ Revelation 7:9

In his grand design God calls us to embrace cross-cultural connections and celebrate the diversity among us. The vision in Revelation reveals a glimpse of the eternal kingdom, where people from every nation, tribe, and language will stand united before the throne, worshipping our Lord and Savior.

Cross-cultural connections allow us to experience the richness and beauty of God's creation. As we interact with people from different cultures, we can learn, grow, and broaden our perspectives. We discover the immense tapestry of humanity, woven together by the Creator's loving hand.

This also requires humility, openness, and a willingness to step out of our comfort zones. It calls us to set aside preconceived notions and to appreciate the backgrounds and experiences of others. Through genuine relationships, we can foster unity, break down barriers, and bridge gaps that divide us.

Following Jesus' example, we learn to love and accept others as they are. Doing so, we become ambassadors of reconciliation and unity, reflecting the heart of God to a fragmented world.

Today let's seek opportunities to engage with individuals from different cultures, listening, learning, and building meaningful relationships. And may our lives bear witness to the power of God's love, fostering unity among all peoples.

Prayer: Lord, we cherish your diverse creation. Use us for unity and reconciliation, reflecting your love. In Jesus, Amen.

Source: Darrell Delaney, todaydevotional.com

Submitted by: John Pondiccio

God's Light

I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

~ John 15:5

This Scripture comes from the Gospel of John. John was one of Jesus' closest companions. Jesus chose the metaphor of a vine because of its significance. The figure of a vine pictures an intimate union with branches that are totally dependent upon it. Jesus is demonstrating that if we stay connected to him several things will occur:

We will always have a power source.

We will always bear good fruit.

We will never hunger or thirst for anything.

God is as close to us as a vine to its branch – we are never alone.

We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us.

The promise of having a deep abiding connection to Christ is that not only will we bear much fruit in our lives, we can also do it joyfully and with a full purposeful heart. We need to ask ourselves how many things we attach ourselves to for our own well-being. Is it food, alcohol, shopping, approval, work, busyness, fame, status, wealth, or possessions? God invites us to have no substitutes for the real thing. Christ desires to be the sole source of everything we need and desire!

One Minute Reflection: *Is Christ sufficient for all your needs?*

Source: Tracy Baumer Fox (*Having a Heart for God*)

Submitted by: Sherrie Ruschmeyer

Connections: *From the Heavens to the Henhouse****Genesis 15:1, 5-6***

^{15:1}The word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.”... ⁵He brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.”

Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.”

⁶And Abram believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Philippians 3:17 – 4:1

^{3:17}Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears.

¹⁹Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. ²⁰But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

²¹He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

^{4:1}Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

Luke 13:31-34

^{13:31}At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” ³²Jesus said to them, “Go and tell that fox for me ...

³³ ‘I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.’ ³⁴Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

Connection

This makes for harmony among the members, so that all the members care for each other. If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is honored, all the parts are glad.

~ 1 Corinthians 12:25-26

Most of us have connections in our life. We have family. We have friends. We are blessed with the connection of a village, of a school, of a neighborhood, club or church. But sometimes, those we rely on are not available. We find ourselves in a dark place with our support system gone, our rope seemingly not attached to anything. And yet, there are these small connections that do help us to be tethered.

There are small gestures that can be seen every day if we look for them and acknowledge them. It's the person who lets you get into traffic when you are sitting in gridlock. It's the call center rep on the other end of the line who fully understands what you need. It is the kind gestures of the parking attendant and the small smile of a little girl on the TSA line that can give you hope.

And there are medium size gestures. The acquaintance who sees you walk into a room and waves to motion that there is an open seat near them. Or it's a teammate who sees you looking hot and hands you a water bottle. And it can be a teacher or colleague who senses that you are having a rough day and lets you vent about it.

I believe that our chemical makeup encourages us to reach out to others. Survival is stronger with humans who have hunted, gathered and worked together as a team. But our connectivity to God brings us greater happiness. Loving each other, caring for each other provides a unity not just for survival but for happiness and joy.

Prayer: *Dear Lord, may we see the small, medium and large acts of love and connection in our life knowing that you are with us in these moments. Amen.*

Written by: Carol Ford Eagan

A Moment of Connection

If I speak in the tongues of mortals or of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal...Love is patient. Love is kind...Love never fails.

~ 1 Corinthians 13:1

Jagruti is my cashier at ShopRite. I say “my” because I get in Jagruti’s lane whenever I can. As her line is always the longest, that probably sounds strange. Don’t we look for the shortest line? Not if you know Jagruti!

She always has the best smile, and smiling eyes, while wearing a mask. “How are you today, my friend?” Jagruti asks warmly.

She noticed the bandage taped to my neck after my first cancer surgery, and she took the time to ask me about it. She has subsequently received bite-sized updates of my journey over the past few years. I let her know when I’m going to have surgery, or go on vacation, that she might not see me for a while.

We inquire about each other’s families, and we have many running jokes about the beach. I love the beach, while Jagruti is not a fan!

During the pandemic, when things were very tense in grocery stores, (sure you need no reminder!) Jagruti was a kind, calm, steady presence, while simultaneously likely fearing for her own safety and that of her family. Cashiers never had the option to go remote!

The Fred Factor by Mark Sanborn is subtitled, “How passion in your work and life can turn the ordinary into the extraordinary.” It’s a great book. Fred was Mark’s mailman. Jagruti reminds me so much of Mark’s description of Fred.

No matter your line of work, or the size of your paycheck, you can make a true difference in the lives of others with a smile, a kind word, a “How are you today, my friend?”

That’s why people wait in a long line at the grocery store – for a moment of human connection with Jagruti. I do too.

Prayer: *God, help me to make a difference today with a smile, a kind word, or a listening ear. May others see a glimpse of your love through me and a connection made. Amen.*

Written by: Kim Downey

Connections

My husband and I play the Connections game in the *New York Times*, almost every day at lunch. We are pretty good at it – not perfect – but good. It is a thought-provoking exercise, to try to put together disparate groups into categories that fit, even when the *NYT* tries to fool all of us.

The lesson is a simple one: we can work to find ways to connect to others, even if it takes time and effort. In the post pandemic era, it may be hard to push ourselves to extend a hand, or make the first gesture, or to try to re-unite with a family member or longtime friend. You may have to agree to disagree on subject matter, but it is clear that we need each other more than ever in this world.

Connections may be our salvation.

Written by: Celine Teagarden

Connecting with God

When I first thought of this question, my first response was going into a craft store...it is like a kid going into a candy store. Then I began to think about why this should be so special to me. I discovered that one of my gifts is crafting...candy making, wreath designing and so on. But what brings the feeling of joy is how it affects the people that receive those gifts. You will see smiles, laughter and happiness shine through.

Not too long ago, I worked as a homemaker for the VNA. We were not supposed to get too friendly with our clients...but for me...it didn't take long before I loved and cared for all of them. I couldn't wait to go on these assignments. Each was different, each needed special care. You can comfort them when they need comfort, listen to them, whatever was required for each household. The care was not only helping the patient but the whole family. So where does the connection come in here? It was knowing that when I left for the day, they would be feeling the warmth and love of another person who cares for them. With those feelings left with them is where my connection comes from.

These feelings have popped up in so many different places during my life. In our role as deacons, we get the chance to serve at funerals on occasion. Each funeral brings on different needs for a family. What I find myself doing is hovering over the family and watching if anyone needs special care...tissues...hymnal...a hug or just letting them know you are there for them. I like to send special sympathy notes that I write and make for the family – just like a prayer card, hoping that these “cards” would bring comfort to them in some small way. At one of those services, I was approached by a family member who came running up to me to thank me for the “prayer” card and to let me know that she was going to read it during the service. The happiness for me is knowing that it did bring her comfort during this difficult time.

My connection with God happened many years ago after losing my first husband. I prayed to God to show me the way. He answered by leading me on paths that I would never have chosen and acknowledging the many gifts he has given me. You see...I talk to God every morning...and when I am quiet...I hear him talking to me.

Part of my morning prayer is thanking God for letting me hear when he calls out my name. I am blessed to have heard his voice and to be able to follow in his path.

Written by Ruth Allen

Faith in the Face of Adversity

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

~ Thessalonians 5:16-18

Many years ago, I watched the movie "The Elephant Man" when it was first released, based on the true story of Joseph ("John") Merrick, an Englishman born with severe physical deformities that made him a circus sideshow for much of his life. He was badly abused by his circus handler and thought to be mentally incompetent, but he found compassion through a Victorian doctor who took him under his wing, and by the time he died in 1890 at age 27, he had become a respected member of British society.

There are two scenes that have stayed with me to this day. In one scene, to prove that John is intellectually competent and capable of progress, the doctor trains him to say a few conversational sentences and part of Psalm 23 to meet with the hospital Governor who wants to throw John out as "incurable". While nearly being dismissed John continues to recite the full Psalm and tells the shocked doctors that he knows how to read and has memorized the 23rd Psalm because it is beautiful and his favorite.

In a later scene, John is chased through the streets of London by people thinking he is a monster and when cornered he cries out, "I AM NOT AN ELEPHANT! I AM NOT AN ANIMAL! I AM...A HUMAN BEING!"

Watching this movie, I realized the foundation that spiritual belief can provide someone: faith in the face of adversity no matter how hard your life is, you don't waver. I saw that if someone could surrender themselves to God they would be protected, validated, actualized... saved. John Merrick, despite all the obstacles life threw at him, held firmly to his steadfast belief with unwavering faith and dedication. He felt that God would never abandon him when everyone else had.

I was so moved that I, too, memorized the whole of Psalm 23, for it was also my favorite. I recite it frequently to this day whenever I need to be reminded of God's steadfast love:

"The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever."

Written by: Richard Nyers

Eight Things Jesus Showed Us About Relationships

When someone you love tells you something more than once, you listen. It's important to that person, so it becomes important to you, too. It's the same way with God. When we read the Bible and learn more about who Jesus is, we see how important relationships are to Him. Jesus showed us the importance of relationships in what He said and the way He lived His life.

1. Jesus helps us see what's right when we're with people. When we gather with other Christians, the decisions God wants us to make become even more apparent (Matthew 18:20). We see God most clearly through our relationships with others.
2. Jesus said love is non-negotiable. The most important commandment Jesus gave us is to love God and love others (Matthew 22:34-40). Healthy relationships are so important that God didn't just suggest we treat others well; He commanded it.
3. Jesus is our role model for how to love people. Jesus did everything He could to help His friends and followers know God. We do the same thing when we're willing to do whatever it takes to help friends and family members take their next steps in their walks with Jesus (John 15:12-15).
4. Jesus told His friends not to do life alone. Jesus sent His followers out in pairs to share the good news of God's peace (Luke 10:1-2). Rather than sending them alone, Jesus wanted everyone to have someone to travel and do work with. When God asks us to take the next step, He often uses other Christians to help us along the way.
5. Jesus redefined family. Family is more than just biological parents, siblings and blood relatives. Family includes other Christians, too (Mark 3:31-35).
6. Jesus put others' needs before His wants. After grieving the death of a friend, Jesus planned to spend some restful time alone. Crowds followed Him to a remote place. Rather than being angry and sending them away, Jesus had compassion on them and performed a miracle to feed them (Matthew 14:13-21).
7. Jesus shared meals with people. In Jesus's culture, sharing a meal with someone meant you were no longer strangers, but close friends. Jesus extended His friendship and kindness to people far from God, the religious leaders who thought they had God figured out, and everyone in between (Mark 2:15-17, Luke 7:36).
8. Jesus emphasized individuals over tasks. Jesus wants His followers to care for hurting and troubled people (John 21:15-17). Rather than seeing people as projects to improve, He wants us to love the way He loved and serve the way He served — personally and unconditionally.

Source: New Spring Church

Submitted by: Marie Immohr

Connections: *From Empty to Full***Isaiah 55:1-9**

^{55:1}Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

²Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. ³Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.

I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.

⁴See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples.

⁵See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel,

for he has glorified you. ⁶Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; ⁷let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God,

for he will abundantly pardon. ⁸For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. ⁹For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

1 Cor. 10:16-17

^{10:16}The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?

¹⁷Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

Luke 13:1-9

¹³At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

²He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?"

³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.

⁴Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?

⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

⁶Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?'

⁸He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it.

⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

Connection Goes Beyond People

The Bible teaches that connection goes beyond just people. It talks about how we need to connect with God. This connection is built through prayer, trust, and belief. Just like we feel close to our friends when we talk to them, we grow closer to God when we talk to Him. It is a relationship that gives us strength and comfort.

In the Bible, connection is also about showing kindness and helping others. It reminds us that when we reach out to someone in need, we are building a connection that reflects love and care. Helping others is a way to bring people together, and it makes the world a better place.

So, the Bible encourages us to build strong connections with people and with God. These connections make our lives fuller and give us a sense of purpose. Whether it is a bond with family, friends, or God, connection is a key part of a meaningful life.

Written by: Jim Eagan

Caring for Creation

Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.

~ Matthew 6:26

One Sunday morning I found myself looking out at the backyard, which was cloaked in a layer of snow. As I stood enjoying the beautiful wintry scene, I noticed that a large hemlock had dropped its tiny cones — delivering seeds to the ground where rabbits, squirrels, and birds delighted in nature's gift to them.

After church, I again stopped to take in the snowy landscape that always draws my heart and mind to God and creation. A fresh layer of snow had fallen, and on top of the snow — under the hemlock — lay more tiny cones. It was as if God had shaken the tree branches to provide more food for the critters. The scene was a perfect image of the verse from Matthew above. I smiled as I thought of the satisfaction I get from putting out bird seed, fruit, and water all year around. I am God's hands and feet caring for creation, fulfilling the role I believe God plans for us all.

Watching the wildlife in my backyard, I'm envious of their carefree nature. Truly they neither sow nor reap; nor do they worry. God feeds them — both directly through nature and indirectly through people like you and me who derive satisfaction from caring for God's creatures, great and small.

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, thank you for the privilege of caring for your creation. Amen*

Written by: Nancy Allman-Bull in *The Upper Room*

Submitted by: Sue Boughton

Connecting with Justice

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

~ Micah 6:8

This scripture assigns us three things God requires of us. To act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

By acting justly, we will do what is right and fair for others in our home, neighborhood, village or world – providing others with the opportunities to thrive as they find their way in the world.

To show mercy, we will have compassion for those in situations of anxiety and fear – showing love and guidance in their time of need.

We are to humbly strive for justice and mercy, giving God the praise and glory for guiding us in the right way to show love to our neighbor.

Let us review the scripture as recorded in *The Message*:

He's already made it plain how to live, what to do, what GOD is looking for in men and women. It's quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbor, be compassionate and loyal in your love, and don't take yourself too seriously — take God seriously.

Prayer: *Holy Spirit, we humbly ask your guidance to find the right way to be just and show mercy to others in our community and the world.*

Written by: Ruth Reda

How do I reconnect with God?

If we believe not, yet he abides faithful: he cannot deny himself.

~ 2 Timothy 2:13

How does a person restore a connection with God? That was the question posed by a friend of "Guidelines." She struggled in even writing the letter, saying that four years ago she had written asking the same question but never mailed the letter. Now a little girl, three years of age, is asking questions about God, and all of this triggers feelings of remorse and regret.

Like so many who have drifted away from the warmth of the Father's love, this young woman sustained a loss, a big one. Her brother was brutally murdered, and, when this happened, her heart cried out, "God, why did you let this happen? Where were you when my brother needed your help?"

Scores of people have been there. Yes, they know that if God undertook every time that one of His children was in need, everybody would want to line up on God's side, just to avoid the pain and disappointment of living in a broken world. I'm thinking of a cartoon that shows a crusader standing over a pagan, his sword resting on the neck of the subdued person, who, looking up says, "Tell me more about your new religion. I'm terribly interested!" Hey, that's the way it would be with the whole world, if we who are Christians always came out on top.

People who once connected with God know that the Bible is full of stories about individuals who were godly people who were mistreated and suffered without cause. Daniel was thrown to the lions. Jeremiah was cast into a slime pit and left to die. Elijah lived in exile with a price on his head. David had to hide out for seven years as Saul sought to kill him.

Down in their hearts, people who blame God for what happens know that God isn't the one who caused the problem. They simply have turned and walked away because He didn't reverse the tide of evil or the wickedness which broke the tranquility and order of their lives.

Then a little child begins asking about God, or a friend lies at the point of death, or in the darkness of their souls they begin thinking about how it used to be, how at one time the joy of the Lord was real, and when they prayed, the presence of God seemed so close and meaningful.

Here's the question: How do you restore the broken connection with God? Just asking the question, facing the issue, means you recognize the deep longing in your heart to connect with God. When David realized that the affair with Bathsheba had broken his connection with God, he prayed, pouring out his heart and honestly telling God how he felt. Psalm 51 records this. That's your first step. Realize that God is far more desirous of embracing you and drawing you to Himself than you are to have Him do this.

Gently remind yourself that it was not God who moved. You did. So, come back. Paul wrote Timothy, saying, *"Even when we are too weak to have any faith left, he remains faithful to us and will help us, for he cannot disown us who are part of himself, and he will always carry out his promises to us"* (2 Timothy 2:13)

Continued on next page

Paul is saying that God's nature is that of faithfulness. His love is unchanging, and His desire to have fellowship with you hasn't lessened in spite of your detour from His presence.

Finally, draw a line and step across it. Say, "As for the past, I leave it behind. I choose to walk with the Lord. Get back to church, and dust off your Bible and start reading it. Underline it, memorize it and realize it's God's love letter to you personally.

It's time to restore a broken connection.

Source: Dr. Harold J. Sala, *Guidelines for Living on Guidelines.org*

Submitted by: John Pondiccio

Seeing the Backside of God

[God said to Moses,] "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen."

~ Exodus 33:21-23

Sometimes, like Moses, I long to encounter God face-to-face. Moses didn't catch the whites of the Divine Eyes but instead a short glimpse of God's backside. I know the feeling.

In young adulthood, for instance, I pled for God to pop out from behind the cash register of the grocery store where I worked and announce that it was time to move on. Instead, I received a conversation with a co-worker who asked, "Why not?"

As a first-time mother, pacing the hospital hallways while my tiny infant healed in a NICU incubator, I asked God to show up around every corridor's corner. Instead, I received an acquaintance who dropped off a restaurant meal in a fancy to-go container.

When I was walking a close family member through his last days, I wondered if God might show Their face in a miraculous reversal. Instead, I received regular encouraging texts from a friend who herself battles chronic illness.

It is not always granted us to encounter God face-to-face. But like Moses I have learned that, brief and humble though our God sightings might be, they can be more than enough to nudge us onto the next thing and then sustain us on the journey.

Prayer: *Divine One, let us see you, even in ways we don't ask for. Amen.*

Source: Jennifer Ruth Lynn Garrison, published in UCC Daily Devotionals at ucc.org on Feb 7, 2025

Submitted by: Pastor Jennifer Whipple

I love God connections!

Relationships are some of the most special connections in our lives. Every person that we meet deserves respect for their strengths, love for their faults, empathy for their losses, and joy for their triumphs.

~ Nick Ruschmeyer

Connection is defined as “The act of joining or state of being joined; a state of being knit or fastened together; union by junction, by an intervening substance or medium, by dependence or relation.”

I have found in certain times of my life God will connect me with someone who intimately knows what I am going through. They have gone through it themselves and gained victory. These God connections are timely, and they are precious to me.

One of my favorite scriptures is 2 Corinthians 1:4. It refers to this very thing. *“Who comforts and encourages us in every trouble so that we will be able to comfort and encourage those who are in any kind of trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.”*

This scripture is saying we go through times that are hard. In those times, God strengthens us and comforts us. But He doesn't stop there. He gives us an anointing to help someone else come through the same thing. Perhaps you went through such a time. A challenging season. Don't waste that anointing!

Ask God to show you people you can pray for. People you can encourage. People you can share your story with. You have a God-given anointing to help them. Just this week, God brought me in contact with a person on a matter that seemed very common. One day after the connection, I found it wasn't common at all. It was, indeed, a timely God connection!

He has a God connection for you. Ask Him for it. Seek Him for it. Someone has walked through what you are walking through. Someone has gained victory in that area. They intimately know the way out...they will help you walk it out.

Yes, God will walk with you. If no one else does, God certainly will. And sometimes, it is only God who will walk with us through it. However, there are times, He sends people to walk with us...recognize and discern those times.

It is my prayer today, if God has a person to help you overcome, He will send them across your path this day. May you recognize them quickly.

Source: Kim Potter

Submitted by: Sherrie Ruschmeyer

Connections: *From Famine to Feasting****Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32***

¹⁵Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him.

²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying,

“This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” ³So he told them this parable:

¹¹Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’

So he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs.

¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ ²⁰So he set off and went to his father.

But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.

²⁹But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’

³¹Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.

³²But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

Path to Connecting with God

As I was wondering what to enter for this year's Lenten devotional, I came across these devotions/messages from Pinterest. My connection with God comes from my "talking/praying" to HIM. Especially when I have issues that I am troubled over. Learning how to let go and let GOD take care of my issues has actually just happened. The feeling of such peace comes over me. The wonderful warm feelings I have inside of me happen when I have prayed for miracles...and they come true. He actually tells me where to find things that I have lost. These are just a few of the times when I have actually felt HIM. It's a glorious feeling!!!

I WANT TO GO TO CHURCH

Not for traditions. Not for show. Not for entertainment. **BUT TO WORSHIP MY GOD.** Expecting Him to speak to me. Gathering with others who love Him, as we are called to do. Spending time in prayer. Praising Him through music, as they did long ago. Laying down my burdens, knowing that He will willingly take them. Thanking Him for the most precious gifts in my life. Begging Him to soften the hearts of those who haven't accepted Him. Feeling His never-ending perfect love wash over me.

When you pray, be sure you also listen. You have things that you want to say to GOD. But he also has things that HE wants to say to you.

GOD ANSWERS IN THREE WAYS:

He says yes and gives you what you want. He says no and gives you something better. He says wait and gives you the best.

CULTIVATE A DAILY PRAYER PRACTICE

Prayer is one of the effective ways to connect with God. Prayer serves as a fundamental and essential means of communication with God. It surpasses mere formality or ritual and transcends into heartfelt conversations with your Creator. Anytime and anywhere, you can engage in dialogue with God, discussing anything that rests upon your heart. Whether it's praise, gratitude, confession, supplication, sharing your joys and sorrows, or merely expressing your love for Him, remember that God is always listening, eagerly waiting to respond.

Prayer: Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. ~ Revelation 3:20

Source: Godfruits.com

Written/Submitted by: Ruth Allen

Leaving Grief's House

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long"

~ Psalm 23:6

For a while after the death, I lived in Grief's house. In that house, some rooms were stripped bare, lacking any comfort. When I fled those empty chambers, I found other rooms overstuffed with mementos, scraps of paper, and heavy furnishings. Still, I felt safe there, in Grief's house.

In time, I heard a knocking. Following the sound through empty rooms and full ones, I found a door. Honestly, until then, I didn't even know that Grief's house had a door to the outside. The door was heavy, but I pushed with all my might and at last it creaked open. Goodness stood on the doorstep, a covered plate in her arms. Mercy was right behind her, carrying a huge bouquet of flowers.

Grief's house had protected me even, it seemed, from kindness, and I still could not let them all the way in. But we sat in the garden, Goodness and Mercy and I, and we ate and talked and cried and laughed. This house, they told me, was a sturdy place to stay for a while, but there were other things to see in the world besides its small rooms. "And we will go with you," they assured me, "all the way."

Sometimes I go back to Grief's house to visit. But most of the time I live now in the Lord's house. The meadows there are green, and the waters are still, and sometimes the valleys are shadowy, and Goodness and Mercy are right there, just over my shoulder, urging me ever onward.

Prayer: *You are my Shepherd. Thank you for guiding me all the way. Amen.*

Source: Jennifer Ruth Lynn Garrison, Dailydevotional@ucc.org, April 16, 2024

Submitted by: Leslie Sands

When I thought about our devotional theme of connections, this beautiful devotional from the UCC came to mind. Don't we all, at some time in our life, connect through our shared struggle with grief? Just as did those in Jesus' time as they wept at the tomb.

The Connection We Crave

A few years ago, I went home to see my parents for the weekend and met with some friends from my childhood days. Nearly every one of my close friends from junior and high school still lives in the same community where we grew up. When I go back to visit, it's like rewinding to myself at age 17.

After three or four hours of sitting around the table, eating, laughing, commiserating and reliving a hundred hilarious memories, we started vision-casting about the retirement house on the beach we will one day share. We were joking (kind of), but the idea of deep-down communal living made my heart sing. There is just something about the vision of dear friends cooking together and sharing the daily mundane that sounds pretty perfect to me. Why? Because even if a house full of friends isn't your dream come true, you were built by God for deep relationships.

In fact, God existed in relationship with Himself before any of us were here. It's called the Trinity. God is one, and God is three. For all eternity, God has existed in relationship — as Father, Spirit and Son (Jesus).

Scripture says the Son exists to glorify the Father, and the Father exists to glorify the Son. It says the Spirit exists to glorify them both. What that means is they help each other, promote each other, serve each other and love each other. What's more, this exchange has been going on for all eternity. It means our God has been relational forever. It means He created us out of relationship for relationship — and not a relationship that is surface level or self-seeking. No, the relationship He has in mind for us is sacrificial, intimate, moment-by-moment connection.

We were made in the image of God, who is relationship. This means our longing for healthy, mutually submissive, supportive, interdependent relationships isn't simply us craving something good for us, like vegetables or vitamins. We are craving the fundamental reason we were created. We weren't just built for community; we were built because of it.

But here is where we go wrong. We look to people to complete and fill what only God is meant to fill. This is the primary reason we can all be so unhappy with each other. We have put our hope in imperfect people. But that hope can successfully be answered only in God Himself. Eternity is set in our hearts, Ecclesiastes 3:11 says, which means only a relationship with an eternal God can fill our hearts.

Consider what you're aiming your hope toward. Who is in the center of your affections? Who is in the center of your identity? We all have a choice. If God is in the center of our relational circle, we will be fulfilled, and out of that fulfillment we can bless others. But if people are in the center of our relational circle, we end up pulling on others to meet needs that they can't ever fully meet.

Jesus said it clearest. When asked to name the greatest commandment, He said all the commandments could be boiled down to this: "... You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-39).

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When you have God in the right place, at the center of your affections, you will more likely get people right. Relationship with God comes first, but that relationship is meant to send us into loving others.

This all matters so much because ...

We make each other better. *“As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.” (Proverbs 27:17, NIV)*

We remind each other of God and His plans for us. *“... that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith.” (Romans 1:12, NIV)*

If the God of the universe exists in community, we also need a collective belonging because God built us for it.

Prayer: *God, thank You for modeling how we are to live in community with others and for the gift of people — even when relationships are hard. Will You help me personally find deep community? Help me make friends and keep them as I live out my commitment to You, Your Church and Your plans for me. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.*

Source: Jennie Allen from www.proverbs31.org

Submitted by: Carol Ford Eagan

Hands that Hold

"From the fruit of their lips people are filled with good things, and the work of their hands brings them reward."

- Proverbs 12:14 NIV

On June 24, 2024, my father Alex passed away and I made this post on my Facebook page:



These are the hands that held me at my birth, guided me in my growth, reprimanded me when I needed it, taught me to pray, showed me how to master skills, congratulated me for my achievements, and best of all embraced me with his love. I was privileged to hold them at his peaceful passing as we commended his spirit to God.

Rest in Peace Daddy, we love you! 1920-2024

As I was at his bedside with my sisters and brother, I just kept marveling at my dad's hands. Somehow all through my life I had been fascinated by them as I watched him do things: kneading dough, stretching strudel dough across the kitchen table, peeling apples, pitting cherries, packing canning jars, salting his dinner plate and holding his utensils, holding his coffee cup, holding the daily newspaper, sifting the gravel out of his garden, planting, hoeing, weeding, pruning, how he held the leaf rake, how he held his razor while shaving, showing affection when he petted our cats and dogs or reached out to hold us, how he bathed us when we were young, how he cupped his hand while swimming, how he held the steering wheel and rubbed his thumbnails together while driving, how his 4mm white gold wedding band was the only jewelry he wore, how he held my mother's hand out while leading a dance.

These were a man's hands, and I wondered what mine would look like when I grew up. I imagined all the history that he lived through and what his hands had done from stories he told: rolling silly putty over the wallpapered walls when he was a child to remove the furnace's coal dust, opening the isinglass stove door to stoke the fire, holding his rifle and putting his helmet on during maneuvers in World War II and changing the bandages of the wounded soldiers as he was a medic, sorting mail and later training employees at the post office where he worked for 37 years.

Continued on next page

I watched him continue to do the things he loved and his daily routines as his hands became crooked with arthritis, how his hands held the walker he braced himself with, and then eventually how his hands gripped the arms of his wheelchair as he pushed himself up. I had watched his hands, too, in prayer, making the sign of the cross on himself and fingering his rosary beads daily.

So, while he slept in his final moments with us, I focused on my dad's hands and thanked God for the work these hands had done in service to all he was called to do.

I look down at my own hands in a new way now reflecting on what I may have been and may still be called to do with them, and I ask for God's grace in being His instrument.

Prayer: *The Lord will open the heavens, the storehouse of his bounty, to send rain on your land in season and to bless all the work of your hands. ~ Deuteronomy 28:12*

Written by: Richard Nyers

David's Prayer Life

"My heart has heard you say, 'Come and talk with me.' And my heart responds, 'LORD, I am coming.'"
~ David, Psalm 27:8

Given the wonders of technology, no longer do we have to try to communicate with someone without seeing their face. If we want to hear their words but also see their eyes and their expressions, we can do so. Even if we may be on the other side of the world from where they are, we can have some face time and feel closer. The same is true in our relationship with God.

It may be a little confusing, but the truth is that God is both near and far from us at the same time. The Bible teaches us that by His Spirit He is within those who have placed their trust in His Son, Jesus. This means that we are never away from God's presence and that He is always with us. But the Bible also teaches us that God is transcendent, meaning He is far above us, up there on the Throne in Heaven and Jesus is at His right hand (Acts 2:32-36; Hebrews 12:2). This explains why sometimes it feels like God is so far away...because in reality, He is.

Yet, God is not so far away that we cannot reach Him. Just like the FaceTime app allows you a facial connection with someone in spite of the distance between you, so prayer allows us a spiritual connection with God in spite of the physical distance between us. Since for now we are not able to go to God's physical Throne and interact with Him, the next best thing is to go to Him remotely, as His Spirit and his Word guide us along in prayer.

For now, prayer is the means that God has given us to have a real-time connection with Him. For it is in these moments that we are able to talk to Him, to ask questions, to offload burdens, to ask for help...we may even cry, we may chuckle, or we may just stop to listen.

But is this legitimate? Is this a meaningful way to communicate with God? David sure thought it was. We know the nitty gritty details about David's prayer life because he posted them for all the world to see. The psalms penned by David disclose that he was constantly facetimeing God. That is, he was always praying. As you read through them, you can't help but notice how many of David's psalms are nothing more than the lyrics of his prayers. Raw, vulnerable, worshipful prayers.

"I pray to you, O LORD, my rock. Do not turn a deaf ear to me. For if you are silent, I might as well give up and die. Listen to my prayer for mercy as I cry out to you for help, as I lift my hands toward your holy sanctuary." ~ David, Psalm 28:1-2

David, this iconic though imperfect hero of the faith, did not let the fact that God was way up in Heaven keep him from talking to Him. Even though he could not get face-to-face, he could still connect with God. His prayers serve as vivid reminders today that something special happens when we take a minute to go offline with _____ and go online with God.

You ready? Let's go. It's a new day with God. Run with it.

Source: DevotionsontheRun.com

Submitted by: Marie Immohr

An Invisible Thread

An Invisible Thread

Like a fragile thread,
We are connected,
Bound by a force
Unseen.

In the tapestry of life,
Our paths intertwine
Weaving a story yet untold.

From strangers to friends,
From friends to family,
Our hearts expand with every
connection made.

For in the end, we are all linked,
By an invisible thread,
That binds up together
Forevermore.

Source: Richard Paul Evans

Submitted by: Celine Teagarden

Connections: *From Old Ways to New*

Isaiah 43:16-21

¹⁶ Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters,
¹⁷ who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down; they cannot rise;
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:
¹⁸ Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old.
¹⁹ I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.
²⁰ The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches,
for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people,
²¹ the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

John 12:1-8

¹ Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ² There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him. ³ Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus's feet, and wiped them^[a] with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵ "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" ⁶ (He said this not because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) ⁷ Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it^[b] so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸ You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Made for Connection

Even with all the differences in churches, most have one feature in common: chairs or pews all facing one direction. Yes, we should all be positioned to pay attention to the sermon, but we also need to turn around and see the faces of our fellow worshippers. God gathers us so we can walk together on our journey of faith (1 Thessalonians 5:11-18). We need each other in order to grow—to help and be helped (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12).

Take time to notice and appreciate the people God has put in your life. Especially consider those who are different from you—individuals you might not automatically be drawn to. Who's in a season of life similar to yours? Who could offer wisdom? Who could offer accountability? Is there someone who can encourage you in a hard time (or who needs a kind word)?

The Christian life is at its richest when shared, day in and day out. Prayerfully ask the Lord to help you make meaningful, lasting connections with your sisters and brothers in Him.

Think about it:

Make a list of two or three people you'd like to get to know better. Ask one to have conversation over a cup of coffee or share a meal with you. It may be intimidating at first, but joy waits on the other side.

Source: *Intouch.org*

Submitted by: John Pondiccio

Connecting with God Every Day

I have tried to make certain objects, places, and routines help me remember to connect with God on a daily basis.

Every day when I leave the house, I drive up Route 133 towards our church. The first thing I see is our beautiful, tall, white steeple. I love how it points to heaven. It brings a smile to my face. Oftentimes I think about loved ones who have passed or happy times I've had at our church with my family. For example, the boys always enjoyed ringing the bells in the steeple at the beginning of church services and at the end of their Uncle's wedding. I have a photograph of the steeple when it was being painted in the family room, too. The steeple has become one of my favorite objects to help me to remember the goodness that God and church has brought to my life.

The sun rising over Happy Landings is a place that connects me to God. I was mentoring a confirmand many years ago, and I told her I would pray for her every time I drove by Happy Landings. Even though that was so long ago, I still pray for her. I also just remember how beautiful God has created Earth and my everyday surroundings. I try not to take advantage of my hometown, and the sunrise over Happy Landings is a daily reminder of how lucky I am to live here. Thank you, God.

Believe it or not...I often pray while folding the laundry too. I read somewhere that praying during everyday chores is a good habit. I pray for the people who I am folding laundry for. I pray for my parents and friends, too. Sometimes I am very specific, and other times I just acknowledge their presence in my life. It actually makes doing the laundry more enjoyable. (I used to pray when doing the dishes, too, but I am lucky to have a husband who does the dishes now.)

Prayer: God, thank you for the daily reminders of your love. Let everyday objects, places, and/or routines bring me closer to you. Amen

Written by: Linae Wutzl

Rejoice!

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”

~ Philippians 4:4

Recently, my mother went home to be with the Lord. Even though she lived her 83 years to the fullest, my heart was still broken. I wanted her memorial to emulate the bright and courageous way she enjoyed life — so we followed her three simple instructions: no black clothes, only upbeat stories, and, if possible, only tears of joy.

I searched for a way to pay homage to Mom that would honor her wishes but also be a unique example of my love for her. Feeling overwhelmed, I turned to God.

The answer to my prayers came in the form of a small stone. I discovered that I could order decorative river rocks with different inscriptions: Love, Hope, Faith, etc. The word I decided on was Celebrate, because it seemed the perfect embodiment of a life well lived.

The day of the memorial, I placed the stones next to the guest book. At the luncheon afterward, the inscribed stones were all anyone talked about. Family and friends loved having a tangible reminder of Mom to celebrate her forever. I still miss Mom every day. But I faithfully carry my stone and draw additional strength from Hebrews 13:5: “[God] will never leave you or forsake you” (NRSV).

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, thank you for loving us today, tomorrow, and always. Amen.*

Source: Kevin Evelyn in the *Upper Room*

Submitted by: Sue Boughton

We Need Connection

Sometimes when things around us get overwhelming, we can go into our protective shell and shut out the rest of the world. We hear about politics, weather events, gun violence and other “newsworthy” events, and it can be disturbing. We try to focus on things that we can control and let the things that we can’t hopefully take care of themselves. It may help for a little while, but eventually we may become lost.

Why? Lack of connection to other people. We, as humans, need that connection. It sustains us. Connecting with others boosts our mood, gives us a feeling of belonging, reduces stress and can improve our mental and physical health. It can just make us feel better.

Recently I was thinking about an old college friend. I hadn’t communicated with him in a long time. I still had his contact information (thank you technology) and decided to reach out to him by text. He answered me quickly and we decided to set up a phone call to catch up. We spoke for about 30 minutes. It was great to catch up with him. We reminisced about old times and discussed things that are going on now with him and his family – and about me and my family. The time flew by. After I hung up, I just felt great. It was great to reconnect with an old friend.

Many of us are working remotely, whether that is by choice or not. Technology has allowed us to do that. But the side effect is lack of in person interaction with others. We can be left to feel as if we are on our own little island. Zoom and Microsoft Meetings can help, but it’s not the same as being with other people. We need closeness to others.

I think we can agree that connection is important, but it is not always easy to achieve. It takes work and effort on your part. You need to take the initiative to make this happen. It doesn’t always just come to you.

Make the effort. Reach out. Connect with old and new friends. I promise it will make you feel better.

Written by: Jim Eagan

Daily Gratitude

O Lord, we give thanks for your presence, which greets us each day in the guise of a friend, a work of nature, or a story from a stranger.

We are reminded through these messengers in our times of deepest need that you are indeed watching over us.

Lord, we have known you in the love and care of a friend, who envelopes and keeps us company in our despair.

When we observe the last morning glory stretching faithfully to receive what warmth is left in the chilly sunshine, we are heartened and inspired to do the same.

When we are hesitant to speak up and then read in the newspaper a story of courage and controversy, we find our voice lifted and strengthened by your message in black and white type.

Lord, we are grateful receivers of all the angelic messages that surround us every day.

Source: *Publications International Ltd*

Submitted by: Carol Ryan

Coincidence or Connection?

Recently I attended a women's retreat whose goal is to support women of color in their communication gifts. Mealtimes were great for supportive conversations and camaraderie. At one lunch, I asked a woman what she was working on. She shared a new idea for a book about her grandmother. As she continued to recollect with us, I started envisioning a children's book. Before I could share my vision, another woman at the table said, "Have you considered writing a children's book?" I almost jumped out of my seat! I was overjoyed to see that two of us were thinking the same thing as we heard the beginning of what will become a wonderful project. And I was delighted to share wisdom gained over the last two years of releasing my children's books.

Some may say it was coincidental that out of all the women at the retreat, a budding children's book writer unknowingly sat at the table with a children's book author and dreamed up a new work. I'd call it a divine connection. These are seen all over scripture. Ruth gleaning in Boaz's field. Mordecai overhearing the plot to assassinate the king. In Acts 8, Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch experienced a divine connection that fulfilled the plan and promise of God to make disciples of every ethnic group. Their story has great reflections for us to consider how God might include us in His divine connections.

First, this divine connection began with a clear prompting from God. An angel of the Lord told Philip exactly where to go. Because he was full of wisdom and the Holy Spirit, Philip recognized God's leading. When God tugs us in an unusual way, how do we respond?

Secondly, the timing was perfect. The Ethiopian Eunuch had questions, and God knew exactly how to intersect with an answer by getting Philip to the right place at the right time. God always has a strategy. When we live recognizing God's sovereignty, we don't give "chance" credit for His work. "God always has a strategy."

Thirdly, we see the Holy Spirit's leading all through this divine connection. He told Philip to join that specific chariot. What if Philip had paused because the chariot held a foreign dignitary? Once Philip, a Jew, saw the Eunuch was an African man, what if he had pulled back, questioned the Spirit's leading? God is not confined to work in our boxes and boundaries! We must walk in the Spirit as Philip did and be watchful and ready when He leads us.

Fourth, Philip began this connection by listening. This posture of humility showed a genuine engagement and opened the door for conversation. He heard this man reading Isaiah, and because of the wisdom God had given him, he was ready to connect this wise and sophisticated man to the knowledge of God that he sought after.

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Fifth, this was not a brief connection. The passage says, “As they were traveling down the road.” According to Levitical law (Deuteronomy 23:1), the Eunuch may have been excluded from worshipping at the temple. This precious man had embarked on a long and expensive journey, and now God guided him to read Isaiah 53 where He saw a suffering servant who experienced injustice. Then God brought Philip to share the good news of Jesus. We can never underestimate how powerful it is to approach with a listening ear and an open heart.

Sixth, this divine encounter changed a life. The eunuch was eager to publicly identify with Jesus in baptism with no barrier to displaying his fervent faith. When God’s Spirit is moving and leading, we will see His guidance with those He connects us to as well! There was no coincidence that their travel and conversation led them to “some water.” God had this whole thing set up!

Finally, this divine encounter concluded with rejoicing. This is a fulfillment of the Gospel—good news of great joy for all people (Luke 2:11). So often we treat sharing the gospel as a duty to be performed. May we never forget how joyful it is to be brought near when you have been far away (Ephesians 2:13) and called a fellow citizen when you have experienced exclusion (Ephesians 2:19). God assigned Philip to preach and minister to large crowds earlier in Acts 8, and there was a great joy. And in this passage, we see God’s divine connection between Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch ended with rejoicing as well.

There is an African Spiritual that says, “I’m gonna live so God can use me, anywhere Lord, anytime.” It’s easy to declare these words in worship. The challenge is to be sincere in desiring that God use us how He pleases. May we be led by the Holy Spirit, sensitive and humble listeners, filled with wisdom and readiness to be used however God pleases, as a connector for His purpose.

Source: Dorena Williamson

Submitted by: Sherrie Ruschmeyer

Connections: *From Silence to Shouts****Luke 19:28-40***

²⁸ After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

²⁹ When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, ³⁰ saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹ If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" ³² So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. ³³ As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" ³⁴ They said, "The Lord needs it." ³⁵ Then they brought it to Jesus, and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶ As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. ³⁷ Now as he was approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, ³⁸ saying,

"Blessed is the king
who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven,
and glory in the highest heaven!"

³⁹ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." ⁴⁰ He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

We Are Family

I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.

~ 1 Corinthians 1:10

Family is supposed to look out for each other, but that doesn't always happen. My daughter had a bit of a lisp, and some boys on the school bus were making fun of her. They'd tease her, call her names and mimic her talking with her lisp, of course exaggerating. Spit actually flew from their middle-school mouths to my little girl's face! She came home in a puddle of humiliation.

I wanted to climb aboard the yellow bus like a mildly deranged mama bear and have a swipe or two at those hooligans, but of course, I restrained myself. (I aspire to be sanely involved with my children's conflicts.) I prayed for grace, forgiveness and wisdom, because the main instigator was my friend's son. Yikes!

And the worst part — my son was a witness to what was happening to his sister.

"Sweetie, what did you do when those mean boys were picking on your sister?"

My usually reliable son averted his eyes and lowered his head.

"Nothing."

Grrr. I wanted to jump out of my skin. But motherhood is all about gulping those deep breaths and praying those "Help me, now!" prayers. "Nothing? You watched your sister get spit on and you did nothing? Why? Help me understand."

Before he could respond, I kept going (as I sometimes do):

"Honey, we belong to the same family — we are Bultemas. We stick together. Family doesn't stand by and do nothing when our sister or brother needs help. Family members take care of each other."

I was trying to teach my son about family, about unity and how to pursue it in our broken, hurting world.

The bus drama with my daughter sparked negative emotions in me, but it was also an opportunity to remember I am called to pursue unity, with bullies and moms of bullies, and with my brothers and sisters in Christ.

"Unity" is kind of a churchy word, but like Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1:10, it just means agreeing with one another, with no divisions or conflict. "Division" in ancient Greek has a connotation of ripping or tearing fabric, so literally, Paul begged the church members in Corinth to not be ripped apart. But ... drama and conflict come up all the time — can I get a witness? It pops up with friends, kids, siblings and between husbands and wives. It flares on the playground, the workplace, the big yellow school bus.

Continued on the next page

We can't avoid conflict, but we do get to choose how to deal with it. Do we make the rip worse, or do we do all we can to mend and heal?

When he wrote his letter, Paul knew the local church in this Greek city was a hot mess of overblown drama and bitter contention. Four cliques had formed — each was sure they were right, and everyone else was wrong. Church members were even suing each other! I love how Paul writes with a pastor's heart, using family language. At least 20 times, Paul addresses his “brothers and sisters,” his “adelphos” in Greek. His loving-yet-firm tone is one we might use if we were going out for coffee with a sibling or a friend who had lost their way. “Oh, friend ... I love you, but this has got to stop.” Let “there be no divisions among you,” Paul writes.

No drama.

No he said/she said.

No spitting on each other.

No hurting each other!

Instead “... be perfectly united in mind and thought.”

Build each other up.

Gently, patiently, kindly.

At peace.

By the way, the instigator in my girl's bus drama? With his mom's encouragement, he came over and apologized, giving my daughter a gift card he bought with his own money. Grace ruled, and harmony was restored.

Life delivers many reasons to be at odds with our sisters (and our brothers). Let's look for ways to be at one with them instead. Let's also look for ways to be family to each other, to stand up for each other as dearly loved daughters and sons of a Good Father. Because family takes care of each other, always.

Prayer: *Father, help me see ways I can bring unity and peace in Your Name today. Fill me with Your love and grace in the midst of drama. In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

Source: Cindy Butema from www.proverbs31.org

Submitted by: Carol Ford Eagan

Go and Do Likewise

"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii[c] and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

~ Luke 10:30-37

I was asked once by a friend of mine to open a room in my home for someone in need. You see, a few years after college when I bought my first house in the early 90's, I would rent out two bedrooms to students at the nearby university. This helped to make my mortgage payment and kept me engaged remotely with campus life.

There was one semester that I only had one student renting a room. My friend Fred was aware of this when he asked the favor. I had known Fred through my profession in the Third Order of St. Francis. Fred was also a volunteer with Hospice and AIDS Ministries in South Bend, IN, my hometown. There was an AIDS patient who needed housing. His partner had died, his mother and sister wouldn't take him in and his elderly grandparents who had recently been housing him could no longer care for him with declining health issues of their own, so AIDS Ministries secured a hotel room through a benefactor, but the financial resources were running out.

And so, I was asked, "Could you house him?" He would pay me a monthly stipend and be responsible for his own food and volunteers would come to check in on him and provide any transportation needed for his care.

I asked myself, "Why me?" At Fred's prompting I agreed to meet with the patient but had made up my mind that we wouldn't be compatible and besides, I had another student living in the house to be concerned for. Well, I met with him...and God touched my heart through Ernest.

Ernest was a 30-something, rail-thin black man dealing with Kaposi sarcoma, yet he beamed with an inner light when he reached out to welcome me. He was bubbling with life as he told me his story of growing up in the South, past military service, past jobs and relocations, and meeting the love of his life before this devastating disease set in and tore his world apart. Now, I had to rethink my decision and discuss with my student roommate what to do. We both prayed fervently about it and were presented with information from AIDS Ministries on safe practices in daily routines living with a person with AIDS. And with my student roommate's consent I asked myself the question again, "Why me?" and heard back, "If not me, then who?"

Continued on Next Page

In the short time Ernest lived in my house we became great friends, and I witnessed the reconciliation of him with his mother and sister who came to visit. They shared that if a strange white boy could have compassion maybe they could, too. Ernest passed peacefully with Fred by his side, content with the love of Jesus and his family and friends.

But the story doesn't end there. At the beginning of this story my parents and family had asked me to be very cautious and wise in making my decision. There wasn't much known then about the disease and all the ways it could be contracted, so they were afraid for me. There was much to be learned and a level of comfort to be gained. A few months after Ernest's passing my brother Matthew was diagnosed with AIDS. They had never met but seeing that I could live safely with someone who had the disease allowed my family to embrace my youngest brother with compassion and care at a level of comfort they otherwise may not have had. Matthew was taken at a moment of grace in his sometimes-turbulent life, content, too, in the love and acceptance of Jesus and his family and friends.

I have often opened my day with a prayer, "Lord, give me opportunities to serve." Not always knowing what acts of service may lead to, these experiences have taught me to embrace the ripple effect:

Influence

by Joseph Norris

Drop a pebble in the water,
And its ripples reach out far;
And the sunbeams dancing on them
May reflect them to a star.

Give a smile to someone passing,
Thereby making his morning glad;
It may greet you in the evening
When your own heart may be sad.

Do a deed of simple kindness;
Though its end you may not see,
It may reach, like widening ripples,
Down a long eternity.

Prayers: *For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. ~ Ephesians 2:10*

Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. ~ Luke 6:38

Written by: Richard Nyers

Worship as Connection

Worship is a beautiful way for us to connect with God. It transcends mere singing or ritual; it's an act of love, reverence, and gratitude toward our Lord. When we immerse ourselves in worship, we open our hearts to receive His grace and presence. These Bible verses about connecting with God through worship remind us of its importance in our lives. Together, we celebrate our closed-off hearts opening wide, inviting healing and unity with the Divine. As we worship, we proclaim who God is and what He has done, which strengthens our bond with Him and among ourselves.

“Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs.” ~ Psalm 100:2

“Not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” ~ Hebrews 10:25

“God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.” ~ John 4:24

“Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly, as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.” ~ Colossians 3:16

“Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord.” ~ Ephesians 5:19

Source: 30 Powerful Bible Verses About Connecting With God on biblestudyforyou.com

Submitted by: John Pondiccio

Connecting Through Love

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

~ John 13:34-35

I must confess that I am struggling to keep love in the forefront of my life. Hateful political rhetoric is tugging at the bonds of family and friends. These verses remind me that the only way forward is with LOVE. Love connects us to God. Love connects us to Jesus. Love connects us to each other. Love connects us to the world.

Jesus instructs us to love one another as he has loved us. Jesus showed love to others by feeding the poor, caring for the marginalized, healing the sick. Let us show the world we are his disciples by following his example of caring for the poor, sick, and marginalized.

Hearing a message more than once helps to master the lesson. So, here is the same directive from Jesus as reported in the Message.

Prayer: *Father in heaven, give us the wisdom and courage to demonstrate love to others as you have taught us. Let love heal stressed relationships and lead to a peaceful world. Amen*

Written by Ruth Reda

Peace be with you

Peace Be With You

God wants us to know peace is in every area of our lives—peace in our daily work, our business, our family, our soul. The key to letting peace enter in is to invite God into each of these areas daily.

Peace Be With You

For the promise you unfold with
the opening of each day, I thank you, Lord.

For blessings shared along the way,
I thank you, Lord.

For the comfort of our home filled with love
to keep us warm, I thank you, Lord.

For shelter from the winter storm,
I thank you, Lord.

For the gifts of peace and grace you grant
the family snug within, I thank you, Lord.

For shielding us from harm and sin,
I thank you, Lord.

For the beauty of the snow sparkling
in the winter sun, I thank you, Lord.

For the peace when the day is done,
I thank you, Lord.

Source: *Publications International Ltd*

Submitted by: Carol Ryan

Created for Connection

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

~ Hebrews 10:25

I checked my email as soon as I woke up. Then I made breakfast and checked it again. Had my devotional time and checked it again. Ran some errands and checked it on my phone. When I got home, I checked it once more.

Now, I admit I have a thing about keeping white space in my inbox, but this was about more than managing emails. I sensed the Holy Spirit nudging me to pause and ask myself, "Why do you keep checking your email?"

I wasn't sure if it was God or me answering, but my thoughts intertwined with His Spirit whispering: You keep coming back because your heart longs for connection with a friend. Yet no matter how many times I checked email, it was never enough to satisfy my craving.

Somewhere in the busyness of life I had let many of my friendships reduce to quick connections via email. My schedule was full with kids, school projects, investing time in my marriage, and work.

I knew something had to give, so I asked God to help me find balance. God had recently led me to cut back on the amount of time I spent talking on the phone, socializing with neighbors and hanging out with friends. Although I hadn't completely cut out my friendships, our face-to-face connection time had been reduced to a minimum as I obeyed God's request.

I realized I had not found a good balance, and let the pendulum swing too far. So I checked email repeatedly, trying to fill a God-created need for relationships with a white screen and black alphabet keys. My heart was craving more.

That day as I sat in front of my screen for the fifth time, Jesus revealed the source of my incessant email checking and reminded me I am created for real-life connections. I need to fill that lonely place in my heart with friends I can share life with - in person. That day I called one of my best friends. She happened to be available, so I turned off my computer and spontaneously met her at a coffee shop. It was just what I needed: in-person, heart-to-heart, eye-to-eye connection and conversation.

I know friendships are not easy to build. They take time and most of us don't have enough of it. But in this age of technology, it's important to evaluate and balance connections that are screen-to-screen rather than face-to-face.

We need to pull away from our computers, phones and televisions to intentionally carve out time for friends. Times where we can meet in person to share what's going on in our lives. Hebrews 10:25 instructs us not to give up meeting together to worship and encourage one another. As we see here and throughout the Bible, "meeting together" is important to God.

Continued on next page

Jesus needed face-to-face connections, too. He surrounded Himself with intimate friends – first His Father, then close friends like John, Peter and James, and then the other disciples. He also had friends like Mary, Martha and Lazarus – people He spent time with sharing meals and having conversations about spiritual truths that applied to their lives. Through His example we see how important it is to satisfy our craving for connections by spending face-to-face time with friends.

Although social media is great in moderation, computer “connections” can't substitute real-life relationships. So, who will you connect with face-to-face this week?

Prayer: *Dear Lord, You created me with a need for friends. Yet, I find myself rushing through my days with little time for heart-to-heart connections. Help me to seek You first as my ultimate Friend and then reach out to others so I can have and be a close friend. In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

Source: Renee Swope proverbs31.org

Submitted by: Marie Immohr

Connections: *From Death to Life***1 Cor. 15:19-26**

¹⁹If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.
²⁰But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.
²¹For since death came through a human being,
the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being;
²²for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. ²³But each in his own order:
Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.
²⁴Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father,
after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power.
²⁵For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.
²⁶The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

Luke 24:1-12

²⁴But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb,
taking the spices that they had prepared. ²They found the stone rolled away from the tomb,
³but when they went in, they did not find the body. ⁴While they were perplexed about this,
suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them.
⁵The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them,
“Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.
⁶Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷that the Son of Man
must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again”?
⁸Then they remembered his words, ⁹and returning from the tomb, they told all this
to the eleven and to all the rest.
¹⁰Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women
with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹But these words seemed to them an idle tale,
and they did not believe them. ¹²But Peter got up and ran to the tomb;
stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves;
then he went home, amazed at what had happened.