

Connected

Matthew 8:5-13

Rev. Alida Ward – August 11 2019

So, this is something I like to do -- something my family thinks is a little nuts.

You know how we're all getting so many more sales calls, right, *and* scam calls —

the guys who say "I'm calling from Microsoft, your computer has a virus, if you give money I'll fix it," etc.

Here's what I like to do. I like to engage those callers in conversation. Chat a bit.

See if I can get to know them..

Try to give them a little advice on a better career choice, that kind of thing.

This past week my cell phone rang. Mystery number. I answered it.

There was that brief pause and click that lets you know that this is probably not a personal call,

and then this voice said "Hello, this is Michael. I'm from Westport."

That *seemed*, frankly, unlikely.

I could hear the sounds of a lively call center in the background.

But I went with it. "Hello, Michael," I said.

"Are you the homeowner?" he said.

"No," I said, "no one really is. It's a church home."

"So is the homeowner *there*?" he said.

"Seriously," I said, "there's no homeowner really. It's a parsonage. I'm a pastor."

There was a pause.

"You're a pastor?" he said. "How old are you?"

"Oooh," I said, "that's pretty personal,

and just so you know going forward, asking that question is never going to go over very well.

“But yeah,” I said, “I’m a pastor. It’s a pretty cool job. How’s YOUR job?”

“My job?” he said. “My job is terrible.”

“What makes it terrible?” I asked.

“We sit here,” he said, “and there is a machine that does automatic dialing. Then when it connects, we talk. 500 numbers each day.”

“That sounds pretty rough,” I said.

“It’s very bad, Madam,” he said. “I am so tired, all the time,” he said.

“May I ask,” I said, “are you in an Indian call center by any chance? I know India pretty well.”

“I am not in India,” he said, “but I am close to there.”

We talked a good bit more, actually, and then — click — midsentence — the line went dead.

I can only assume that some irate manager discovered him chatting and pulled the plug.

I was genuinely bummed.

I would have loved to learn more.

I didn’t even find out what he was selling to homeowners.

To be honest, all week I’ve been thinking about “Michael”, in what I picture as an incredibly crowded, hot, room, trying to get through his 500 calls a day.

I’ve wondered what he’s paid — very little, I’m sure.

I wonder who he goes home to, and where.

As I said, my family thinks my behavior is a little nutty.

But I genuinely delight in moments like that, moments when you connect outside yourself to someone whose life is pretty different from yours.

David loves it too — although he doesn’t have extended phone conversations with people, that’s kind of my thing.

But David and I both love traveling for just this reason —

for the moments that travel offers us of connecting in ways that we wouldn’t otherwise have.

Two weeks ago, we got in a cab in Austria,
with a driver who was clearly speaking German as a new language.

We asked him to tell us about himself.

He was Kurdish, he said.

A Kurd born in Syria.

He'd made it to Austria.

My mommy, my daddy, he said, in Syria still.

Tell me about Syria, I said. I hear it is beautiful.

Not now, he said. Not beautiful now.

Isis. Isis.

And all we could say was "we're so sorry."

That was hard and heavy.

But in just two minutes we were connected,

and 'Kurdish People' was no longer just an abstraction seen in headlines
from the Middle East.

In Krakow, I spent a day on a food tour I'd signed up for that turned out to
be just me and a guide named Matt —

apparently not everyone wants four hours of pierogis --

and after a lot of potatoes and cabbage and ungodly amounts of various
liquid specialities,

Matt had told me all about being a child under Communism

and what it had meant to watch Poland change

and how upset he was about their new, nationalist president.

And over our final glass of Polish wine — can't recommend — we discussed
elections and young people voting and solved all the problems of the world.

And there we were — connected — different lives, different stories — but
connected.

To be honest -- without the cabbage and pierogi -

this is exactly what happens on the Appalachia trip,

our service trip that 300 people went on last month.

What happens there, it's connection.

It's not just fixing houses for poor families in West Virginia.

It's people who have never *been* to West Virginia connecting with people who have never left West Virginia,

it's people who have never thought of eating a green tomato sitting with people who want to know what Times Square really looks like.

it's people sharing stories and listening, entering into another person's life, another person's heart.

Connection.

At every worksite I visited this year, every home being worked on, that's what I saw happening.

At one place, standing in the floor of a trailer – I do mean in, not on – it needed a lot of work --

I looked out to see one of our kids sitting side by side with the old man whose trailer it was, listening intently to him.

“I was learning about his whole life,” she told me later. “It was really cool.” That is really cool. Connecting is really cool.

It happens on our India trip too —

that's why I take people there every year — to connect, to connect.

To create moments like I witnessed this past January,

when our teens were running barefoot across playing fields with kids from a tiny rural village,

shrieking with laughter as they tried to figure out the rules of the game of Kabbadi —

which is essentially, rugby with less restraint.

And then collapsing onto the ground together and talking talking talking.

Connecting.

I think it's the most important thing we do here at Greenfield Hill, to be honest.

Finding ways to connect.

Find ways to connect and to learn and to embrace and to open ourselves to another.

Open ourselves to the other.

Why is it so important?

Because, quite simply, it's Christlike.

It's what Jesus did.

It's what he did every day he walked this earth.

He connected. He crossed boundaries to do it. And he connected.

All you have to do is look at that story from Matthew's Gospel that Pam just read to us.

It's a pretty amazing story.

Not all that well known, to be honest.

Jesus is out and about preaching and teaching,

And this Roman centurion comes running up to him to ask for help.

You have to think about that for a moment to realize how crazy that would have been.

The Romans were the occupying force in Israel back then.

They had nothing but contempt for the Jews they were oppressing.

But here's a Roman centurion, a big cheese in the Roman guard, running to Jesus and making this desperate plea.

My servant, he says — and clearly it must be someone beloved to him —

My servant is sick.

And I know you can heal him, Jesus.

So there are any number of things that Jesus could have said right then, That anyone would have excused him for saying.

You've got to be kidding, he could have said.

Your people are oppressing my people.

Your faith is not my faith.

You've got some nerve coming to me for help.

Instead, Jesus says, “I’ll come to your house right now.”
And the centurion says “**I** am not **worthy** to receive you in my house -- just say the word, here and now, and my servant will be healed.”
And Jesus says, “I have never seen faith like yours. Let it be so.”
And that’s it — the servant lying on his bed back home is healed.

It’s *such* an important story.

Look at both these guys in this story.

You’ve got this Roman centurion who just decides not to buy the Roman party line that Jews shouldn’t be trusted, or that this Jesus is a troublemaker.

Instead, he goes to him, he humbles himself, he opens his heart to Jesus. And look at Jesus — who doesn’t hesitate for a moment, doesn’t for *one* moment think about the history of suffering between these two groups, or about how different their beliefs are.

He just says “take me to your home.”

Which, by the way, would have violated *every* Jewish law there was back then

against interacting with Gentiles, Romans.

Jesus just didn’t care. All that mattered was connection.

And you know, it wasn’t just the sick servant back home who was healed in that moment.

I have to believe that everyone in the crowd

who witnessed that moment of extraordinary connection was themselves healed.

I’ve been thinking a lot this week about Jesus and his boundary-breaking commitment to connection.

I’ve been thinking about it because of El Paso.

I’ve been thinking about a young man with an assault weapon,

who saw no point of connection between him and the children of God whom he gunned down.

No commonality whatsoever.

They were The Other to him.

And so he could kill them without remorse.

Those to whom you feel no connection become less than human to you – and that dehumanization is what we saw in El Paso

and what we see wherever entire peoples are dismissed, hated, feared.

It is our nation's greatest challenge now.

Which is why, more than ever, what we try to do here is critical.

We seek connection because it is Christlike.

And we seek connection because, truly, it is the only path to our salvation as a people, as a country.

Earlier this summer,

at one of our outdoor lay-led services,

Adam Simon led us in a powerful reflection on the nature of racism.

And his sermon led us towards this conclusion:

he called us to seek out points of connection with others where true conversation could happen.

He called us into conversation with one another, and with people different from ourselves.

Here's some of what he said:

“This isn't a call for revolution,” Adam said. “I'm asking that we simply talk.

What I'm asking you to do is just to talk.

Not talk *about* each other but talk with each other.

Talk about race and racism.”

“I want you to talk with someone **today**.” Adam said.

“I want you to talk about racism.

And when you are done, listen to them talk about it.

And when the conversation gets uncomfortable,

I want you to forgive them, and then repeat.

Talk, listen, forgive, repeat.

And Adam closed by saying this:

“I’m asking us today to ***pray through conversation*** –

Conversations with God and with each other as a form of prayer for a better world.”

I know I’ve meandered a long way in this sermon,

from a conversation with a guy in a call center

to Adam Simon’s powerful call for us to be in conversation about racism.

But it’s all connected.

It’s all connected to, well, *connecting*.

Because at the heart of our faith is this man, this Savior,

for whom there were no boundaries, no walls,

nothing that got in the way of his love for the other.

A Savior who welcomed those who were different,

who entered into the lives of the other.

And a Savior who called us to think the same way.

And it is that way — the way of connection —

that is not only holy, and not only Christlike,

but is the way of healing, the way of hope.

It is the **only** remedy for the El Pasos

and the Charlottesvilles

and the Charlestons.

We follow the one who loved beyond boundaries, and broke down walls.

We follow the one who listened to the stories of others, and entered into

their lives to heal.

We follow the one who **re**-humanized, not de-humanized –
who *connected*.

Who connected -- and asks us to do the same.

Amen.