

September 28, 2014

“Connecting With Christ’s People”

Pastor Wayne Puls, Senior Pastor of Hope Lutheran Church
John 15:12-17

I have a confession to make. I used to be a non-connected Christian. Back in the Middle Ages, when I was in high school, I had a pretty strong faith for a teenager. I went to church every week with my family. I believed in Jesus, I knew my Bible pretty well, and I liked my church. I just wasn’t really connected to any of the people there. I had my own friends from outside of church – friends from school, and friends from the neighborhood – and I preferred to spend my time with them. I was a Christian. I thought I was a pretty decent follower of Jesus. But I was a non-connected Christian. Maybe some of you are in the same boat today.

Then, when I was a senior in high school, God put this weird dude named Dick Bottcher in my path. He was the new coach of the church’s youth basketball team. After years of being asked and personally invited, I finally joined the team in my senior year. I knew some of the kids, but didn’t consider them friends. The new coach was this guy, Dick Bottcher. He was kind of spacey and flakey, some sort of a reformed hippie from the 60’s. But I quickly learned two things about my new coach. He actually knew a few things about basketball, way more than I did; and, in a convoluted way, he really did care about the kids he was coaching. He took time to get to know us, and he showed interest in what was going on in our lives. Our coach brought his wife and kids to a lot of our practices and games, and he made us feel like we were part of his family, too. I felt like Dick Bottcher was the first person in my church, apart from pastors and DCE’s, who was making an effort to connect with me; and that made a big impression on me, as a teenager. So I let down my guard, I became good friends

with the other guys on the team, and I started seeing the value of connecting with Christ's people.

It turns out, I eventually learned, that being a non-connected Christian isn't really an option. Not according to Christ. Jesus wants his followers to follow him, believe and trust in him, build a relationship with him. And it all starts there, in how you respond to Christ's invitation. But a second mark of being a Christian disciple is in how we relate to one another, how we connect and bond and build relationships here in the church.

Disciples of Christ are not supposed to be non-connected Christians. The Bible says so. Jesus says so.

In John chapter 15, Jesus is talking on the night before his crucifixion to his 12 disciples. Actually, there are only 11 there, because Judas has just bailed out, and is running off to set Jesus up. Meanwhile, Jesus is giving his other followers some final instructions before he's arrested and sentenced to death. He tells them in verse 12: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

Love one another. Is this a suggestion? A request? An optional activity? No, it's a command! Bonding, caring, supporting, watching out for each other – loving one another – is part of what it means to be a disciple, a follower of Christ.

Jesus goes on in verses 13-16, and talks about the kind of sacrificial love he has for them; and about how he chose them and appointed them to do his work. Then he says it again in verse 17: "These things I command you, so that you will love one another."

These things I command **you!** Jesus did not want Peter, Andrew, James, John, the other James, Matthew, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Thaddaeus, and Simon to be non-connected Christians. He didn't invite them to follow him and to live out their faith by being monks, by being isolationist Christians, by just reading and praying and studying all day long. Jesus called those first disciples and chose them to be part of a group, to be part of a family, to be a connected community. Jesus was laying down his life for them to forgive their sins – but also so that his love would be at the heart and core of who they were. “Love one another,” Jesus urged them.

And Jesus urges us, too. The whole New Testament sounds this theme. The words “one another” are repeated over and over, dozens and dozens of times in these pages. God's clear plan for Christians like us is that we should care for one another, serve one another, support one another, forgive one another, love one another as Jesus loved us. Followers of Jesus are not non-connected Christians. Disciples of Jesus are connecting with Christ's people!

So what if you are a non-connected Christian? Is that some gross sin you need to confess? No. Are you banished from the communion rail until you start connecting with others? No. Does that mean you should stop coming to this church? Not at all. It just means that you have something to focus on.

God put that ex-hippie, Dick Bottcher, in my path to help me learn about this aspect of discipleship. And, if you're a non-connected Christian, I'm telling you, this is a discipleship aspect that I believe Jesus wants you to focus on. This is an area of potential growth for you, as a disciple; and this church wants to help you do that.

Maybe you're new to this church, or you've never really been part of a faith community. That's awesome! We're so glad you're here, and on behalf of our pastors, our staff, and our whole church family, we pledge to help you get connected with Christ's people. Isn't that right, church?

But what if you are a connected Christian already? You may say to me, "I've already got this one covered, Pastor. You're preaching to the choir. I've made some sweet connections here at church. I've got friends here to read the Bible with, to pray with, to hang out with. I've got my small group. They've got my back, and I've got theirs." And I say to you, "That's great, but you're not done. That's great, but you're not finished. You've got your small group; but, really, this is your group. The next person to walk in the door for the first time – that's your group." Jesus wants everybody here to be connected, and you are needed to help make sure that this second discipleship challenge – connecting with Christ's people -- is happening with everybody.

Long, long ago, my coach, Dick Bottcher, helped me learn how being a follower of Jesus means connecting with Christ's people. May the Lord's incredible love help us all to do just that. Amen.