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Grace Episcopal Church, Hopkinsville, KY

Pentecost 6/Proper 11/Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm 139:1-11, 22-23; Romans 8:12-25;

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43.

“Longing for Connection”

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, Breath of Life. Amen.

One of the characteristics that makes us the unique human beings that we are is something that we may be relatively unaware of—either in ourselves or in others. It is a characteristic that cannot be seen with the human eye, but rather is something that is felt or experienced or inferred. What I am talking about is our sense of personal boundaries. Those boundaries can be either physical or emotional. We know that experience of someone getting too physically close to us and finding ourselves backing away. Or, on a less concrete or more emotional level, we know that sense of conversational boundaries—what is OK to ask or talk about and what feels like an invasion of privacy.

Several decades ago, when I was in Social Work School, I took a class in Marital Therapy. I remember a particular session in which the professor asked for student opinions on this question--“What is the primary cause of strife in marital relationships?” All sorts of ideas were generated—differences over money, problems with in-laws, differences over approaches to child-rearing, even differences over the proper handling of a tube of toothpaste. And, after each suggestion, the professor kept saying, “Nope, not that one.” Finally, when we had run out of possibilities, she said, “The chief cause of marital conflict is resolving the question—or the dilemma--‘How close are we going to be?’” What are our boundaries going to be with each other? Fighting or arguing between intimate, committed partners—especially when the subject is not earth-shattering--is most often an attempt to enhance intimacy or an attempt to create

distance—to change the boundaries. Usually, one partner wants more intimacy than the other—one becomes more the “fuser” and one becomes more the “isolator”—and a “dance” of sorts is choreographed that becomes very familiar and even habitual, a dance of coming together and moving apart over and over.

Most of us long for connections in our lives, and most of us go through significant times of loneliness. The desire to be known becomes a pervasive longing—at times an urgency. We become frustrated in our relationships because we can’t get our needs for connection met. We think that these relationships are supposed to fulfill our needs and satisfy our longings. And, all too often we travel from one relationship to another because we are looking for something that no other human being can fully give—looking for someone who can fill our emptiness and heal our loneliness—someone who can heal our painful sense of incompleteness and give us that longed-for feeling of wholeness—someone who can calm our inner turmoil and make us finally know that we are OK. And it’s all happening on a primarily unconscious level.

One of the ways in which this situation is seen is in the couples that stop by for a quick check-in with a therapist on their way to the lawyer’s office to file for divorce. They’re already at the point of no return. The one who doesn’t want the divorce is dragging the other one in—hoping that the therapist can “talk some sense” into the one who is determined to end the relationship. The “drag-er” doesn’t understand why the “drag-ee” wants to take what seems like such a ridiculous and extreme action. The feelings are hard to put into words. Maybe the one who wants the divorce doesn’t want to be cruel to the other but knows on some level that there is a connection problem and feels hopeless to do anything about it. Sometimes he says something like this--“I can’t stay in this relationship because she thinks she loves me, but she doesn’t love me. She loves being married, but she doesn’t love me.” What he’s saying is that he feels like he

can no longer endure the lack of connection, lack of intimacy. And the partner has not even a clue about what is being said! It all sounds like gobbledygook. She is in shock and, rather than trying to understand, she tries to convince the partner—and the counselor—that he is wrong. And, in doing that, she keeps perpetuating the problem. She keeps invalidating what he is feeling, and no bridges are being built. Of course, this is not to say that what is happening is all her fault. Both partners have been doing this dance for a long time, but this particular dance is no longer fulfilling—no longer fun. Too often, the one who wants out has already gotten a taste of connection outside the marriage—if you get my drift—and the feeling seems too compelling to resist.

In his book [The Restless Heart](#), Catholic priest and writer Ronald Rolheiser writes about his perspective on the very human dilemma of profound loneliness. It is one of the hallmarks of being human--that pervasive sense of restlessness and separation and incompleteness. Rolheiser believes that it is part of God's plan—placed in humanity from the beginning of creation—and that we each have to deal with it. In the second creation story in Genesis, when Eve arrives on the scene, Adam beholds her and says, “This at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.” It sounds like he's been waiting for her for a long time. Longing for belonging has been part of the human DNA from before recorded history.

Psalms 139 has become one of the most popular in the Psalter. We resonate deeply with the words. “LORD, you have searched me out and known me; you know my sitting down and my rising up; you discern my thoughts from afar.” The belief that God knows everything we do, that God knows every thought we have, that we are never outside of God's presence, that we are never distant from God's touch—all this is too amazing to comprehend. It may be frightening to contemplate, and, at the same time, seem too good to be true.

Rolheiser writes, “Inside each of us, beyond what we can name, we have a dark memory of having once been touched and caressed by hands far gentler than our own. That caress has left a permanent mark, the imprint of a love so tender and good that its memory becomes a prism through which we see everything else. This brand lies beyond conscious memory but forms the center of the heart and soul... Within each of us, at that place where all that is most precious within us takes its root, there is the (inchoate) sense of having once been touched, caressed, loved, and valued in a way that is beyond anything we have ever consciously experienced... It is the place we most guard from others, but the place where we would most want others to come into; the place where we are the most deeply alone and the place of intimacy; the place of innocence and the place where we are violated; the place of our compassion and the place of our rage. In that place we are holy. There we are temples of God, sacred churches of truth and love. It is there, too, that we bear God’s image.” (Rolheiser, 53-55)

The Old Testament is full of stories of this God, whose image we bear, reaching out to God’s people—reaching out to us--and establishing covenants with us. We recently read about the covenants with Abraham and Isaac. And today, in our reading from Genesis, Jacob is on a lonely journey from Canaan to Padam-Aram to find the one who will be his wife. God comes to him in that powerful “Jacob’s ladder” dream and assures him that he is not alone, that he is being led and supported and sustained on this journey, that he also is the recipient of God’s promise. He awakens from his dream with a certain realization: “Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!... How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” How awesome are those places and those occasions, and even those dreams, when God reaches out to us and we are assured of a holy presence surrounding and sustaining us—caring about us and about what we do. We long for that kind of relationship.

Even Paul seems to be talking about this longing for God and sees that it is not only present in humanity but in all creation. He writes to the people at Rome--“We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption.” We wait for the revelation that we belong not to ourselves but to God. We cannot know God’s freedom until we are able to see that reality—that we belong to God. We have been adopted from all eternity and we long to know that most basic truth of who we are. We are fully connected with God.

God created humanity out of God’s own loneliness, and God created us with a loneliness of our own that can only be fulfilled in our relationship with God. This is exactly what St. Augustine was saying when he wrote those memorable and often quoted words, “You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.” Over 1600 years later, we still resonate with Augustine’s words.

What a gift it is when we recognize that only God can meet our deepest needs and that we can then say, in words and actions and attitudes, to those we love and are committed to, “My primary relationship is with God, and I can love you for who you are because you don’t have to be God for me, and I don’t have to be always looking for someone who I want to believe can be that. You are safe with me. You don’t have to fill my emptiness and calm my restlessness.”

Let us pray. Holy One, draw us so deeply into your heart that we may know the wholeness that only you can offer and, from that wholeness, fully be vessels of your love to a world in need of healing. Amen.