

Real Faith for Real Life: Relating/Connectedness

Lessons: **Romans 15:1-6 & John 1:43-46**

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans%2015:1-6;John%201:43-46;&version=65;>

Last summer, we gathered in large groups and small groups and online to discover our core values. We did imaginative exercises, completed surveys, talked and prayed together. After months of effort and linguistic refinement, we came up with six core values of this church. They're listed on the back of your bulletin. Please turn it over and take a look.¹ Let's read them aloud together: passionate faith, extravagant joy, loving respect, deep connectedness, intentional growth, and shared laughter.

You'll notice that three of our core values as a community of faith — loving respect, deep connectedness, and shared laughter — are about having close relationships. Half our core values display our desire for authentic loving connection with each other and with God. We might argue over strategy and furniture and points of theology, but we all agree: loving respect, deep connectedness, and shared laughter, are critical to who we are as a community.

As it turns out, relating or connectedness is also one of the six marks of discipleship that we've been learning as the foundation to following in the way of Jesus. The first three marks — praying, worshipping, and reading the Bible — are all personal practices. They're about the relationship between you and God. The other three — serving, relating, and giving — are all corporate or communal practices. And of those three, we believe that relating is not only a mark of our discipleship, but is essential to who we are as a church.

We're not alone. Human beings crave connection. We are afraid of it, it is hard work, but we crave it. We want to be connected with each other and with God. We long for it, and we were made for it.

The internet has turned into a ready source of connection for we creatures who crave it. The internet is also a ready source of statistics, so here are a couple for you. The website MySpace allows people to post their pictures, information, and interests, and to connect with others who do the same.

MySpace has existed for just a couple of years, but already has about 40 million registered users. That's up from 30 million last summer. The subtitle for MySpace is "A Place for Friends" and one of the features of MySpace is the ability to invite people into friendship — to link to you — and to link to others. This is sort of the internet version of going to a big party and meeting or being introduced to people by other people. The average number of MySpace friends for a MySpace user is 68. That means that each registered user of MySpace has at least a passing acquaintance with an average of 68 other MySpace users.

We love to be connected, and we were made for connection. We are designed for deep connection, both with God and with each other. In the second creation story in Genesis, our need for connection is clear. Here's the story (at Gen. 2:4-22): First God makes man out of dust, and then makes a garden for the man, and then God gives him the guidelines for living in the garden. Soon God says, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." So God makes all the animals, and it turns out that none of them is a sufficient companion for the human. So finally God realizes that the human needs another, and God makes the woman from the man. In this story they are not made for the purpose of procreation — of filling the earth. They are made for connection, and they are made from connection. We are essentially and physically connected, not because we're man and woman, but because humans need to be connected.

¹ (If you're reading this online, they're near the bottom of our home page: www.campbellucc.org/index.html.)

We are essentially connected beings, and our souls crave that intimate, deep, abiding connection which is our God-given nature. We are created with a God-shaped space in our souls that only God can fill. We are also created with a human-shaped space in our souls that only close encounters and authentic relationship with other humans can fill.

It seems to me that the truly amazing, truly unique thing about Jesus – the real reason we call him Christ, Messiah – is this: no one else shows us both the true face of God and the true spirit of humankind in one person. Leave aside his being God incarnate, if you must: No one else teaches us through example what it means to be intimately, deeply, perfectly connected to both God and humankind at the same time.

Jesus was both authentically connected to strangers in need, deeply related with his friends and inextricably in touch with God. Jesus was so closely aligned with both human beings and God because Jesus allowed himself to be open, spiritually naked before both God and human beings. The reason we point to Jesus as savior is because following the way of Jesus fills both the God-shaped hole and the human-shaped space in our souls.

Though all of us crave deep connection, and were made for it, very few of us like to be naked. We don't want to be exposed to God or other people, and when we think we're going to be exposed we grab the nearest fig leaf and throw it over whatever we're most ashamed of. The line from the Psalm that reads, "Where can I flee from your presence, Lord?" (Ps. 139:7) terrifies most of us.

But here's the sin: we don't like to feel vulnerable. We apologize for feeling needy. We are ashamed for wanting to be with others, or for wanting to be held. Grief shames us. Tears of joy embarrass us. Asking for help feels like a crime. We criticize those in physical need who don't want charity, but we don't tell people when we're hurting and can use company and prayer. We'll give cash and hot soup, but we don't want it to come to us. Our children can be in the hospital, and we won't tell. We can be caught in terrible self-destructive habits, and we won't tell. We won't even tell God, much less ask for help, and most of us can't even imagine turning our pain over to God a thousand times a day. And because of all that sin that is separation and self-centeredness and shame, the holes in our souls turn into yawning chasms.

When I was growing up, my mother tried to quit smoking countless times, but would never tell anyone, just in case she failed. Her fear of failure, her fear of being naked, was more important to her than her need for connection and support. And eventually, her fear of being vulnerable killed her.

But our empty souls are killing us, as individuals, and as a species. We die alone in nursing homes. Loved ones suffer from guilt and shame and we never know it. Our children get lost to drugs or greed or interminable adolescence. We start wars over isolated instances of despair and anger. Our souls are in poverty, and many of us are simply starving for authentic, deep connectedness.

But Jesus lays out for us a banquet of connection. He adopts each of us who follow his way into his own family. He points to his disciples and says, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." (Matthew 12:48-50) Even you. He relieves us of worry, because our deepest needs are already being met by God: Steep yourself in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met. Don't be afraid of missing out. You're my dearest friends! The Father wants to give you the very kingdom itself." (Luke 12:30-32 – *The Message*) Even you. He reminds us that we are all connected through him: "Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you. ... I am the Vine, you are the branches. When you're joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant." (John 15:4-6 – *The Message*) Even you. And, he assures us that what we have with him, we will have with each other and with God. Listen to this: "I've loved you the way my Father has loved me. Make yourselves at home in my love. If you keep my commands, you'll remain intimately at home in my love. That's what I've done--kept my Father's commands and made myself at home in his love. I've told

you these things for a purpose: that my joy might be your joy, and your joy wholly mature." (John 15:9-11 – The Message) Even you.

Even you. Imagine being intimately at home in God's love – comfortable, safe, not wanting to flee or hide. Imagine having Jesus' joy be your joy. Imagine being intimately at home with each other, and each other's joy be your joy. That is the promise of deep connectedness with each other and with God through Jesus.

Jesus invites us to a vast banquet of rich friendship, extravagant joy, shared laughter, deep connectedness. But most of settle for nibbling at the hors d'oeuvres. We see each other on Sundays, say hello in the foyer, ask about the kids at coffee hour, and go home. We see God on Sundays, say hello in the songs, tell about other people's problems in the prayers, and go home. Sometimes we get a little taste of the milk and honey of eternal love, but our fear keeps us from being filled.

My brothers and my sisters, I beg you to eat from Jesus' banquet of connection and love. How do you do that? How do you overcome the fear? How do you cut through the shame?

You practice. Relating is a practice. Every day, you practice being open, honest, vulnerable, naked. You practice being both fully human and part of the Vine. There are three kinds of relationships we need to work on to achieve Christlike intimacy:

1) Outward relationships – relationships with lovers, partners, friends, grocery clerks, other drivers, bank tellers, helpdesk operators, and, especially, relationships with your other brothers and sisters in Christ. Here's a little test: When is the last time you looked a salesclerk directly in the eyes as you took your package and said, "Thank you," like you really meant it? What color eyes does the person in the pew next to you have? Does our office administrator have a dog, and if so, what's its name? What are the names of the kids who were up here with me earlier? Who in here is grieving a recent loss? You can have real relationship with each person you encounter in your life. Real relationship is simply about authentic connection – about leaving your comfort zone to be with someone else.

2) Inward relationships – your relationship with yourself. If you spend your time lying to yourself or ignoring your own dis-ease or pretending you don't need love or pretending you don't want connection or pretending you're independent or making up stories about your actual motivation for doing things, or living in fear of loss, you can't have a real, intimate, deep, connected relationship with others. To "love your neighbor as yourself" you have to love yourself.

3) Upward relationships – your personal relationship with God. This is the single most important relationship in your life, and most of us spend less time and attention on that relationship than we do on our relationship with the remote, or the steering wheel.

So how do we practice relating? First, we must slow down. Hurry destroys our outward relationship by causing us to sin. How does it do that? Hurry causes us to make idols of our selves and of our schedules. Hurry makes us treat others like dirt, instead of like the image of Christ. We must take every human encounter seriously. It takes no longer to look the grocery clerk in the eye, say thank you, and mean it, than it does to roll your eyes when she drops your change. It does take a little longer to ask someone, "how are you?" and listen to the answer. It takes even longer to listen to the answer, and to offer to pray with him right then. And it may take even longer for you to get past the small talk and tell someone how you really are, and to ask for their prayer and love. Relating takes longer than isolating. We have to stop making an idol of speed.

Second, we must deal with our worry, shame and fear. Worry, shame, fear, and their cronies the distorted mirror and demon voices, undermine our capacity for meaningful relationship from the outside in. Worry and shame, and that most evil illusion known as independence, focus all our attention inward. We become the center of our own lives. You can't just ignore these demons; you have to exorcise them, walk through them. That's why Alcoholics Anonymous teaches folks to say, "My name is Fred, and I am an alcoholic." The only way to deal with shame, worry, and the voices that say you aren't worthy of being known and loved and cared for, is to bring them outside of ourselves, and expose to light, again and again and again. We have to speak them, and watch them fade away.

Many of us are afraid of being vulnerable because we're afraid of loss. We've lost parents, or been disappointed in love, or been emotionally abandoned at an early age. So we learn independence and distance, because it's hard to let ourselves risk loss again. It's hard to give up the power that comes with distance. But we're not doomed to it, just because we've learned it. Jesus gives us all we need to close the wound. Jesus gives us the model and the Spirit to close the distance between yourself and others. Social friendships won't do it: you have to go deep with God and with people to heal. Deepening your relationship with God gives you the courage to be vulnerable and naked with others. God will always love you, and will never abandon you. That gives you the one solid love you need to risk the rest.

Finally, we must encourage each other, bring each other along. We have to share our struggles with faith and with God. We have to share our battles with self-image and depression and addiction. We have to share our joys. When Philip meets Jesus, when Philip really connects with God, he immediately calls Nathanael, and invites him along. Paul tells the church at Rome to build up their neighbors, and when we are strong, even for a moment, to encourage others. Council and the Real Faith groups have been practicing relating for the last couple of months. Each week, we are assigned someone to call — not only just to make connection, but to encourage, enquire, and support. And, each week, we are assigned to be honest, vulnerable, loving, when we are called.

You have homework today: after you give your offering and before the blessing, please find someone you don't know very well, and exchange phone numbers. Notice the color of his eyes. And just one time this week, call the other person and ask, "how are you? How is it with your soul?" And then listen for the answer.

Because that's Jesus on the other end of the phone. That's Jesus on the other end of the phone.

We have all been called by God into intimate relationship and deep connection. We have all been invited by Jesus to the banquet of love. So drop your fig leaf, and come to the feast.

Let us pray: God, though we are made from the sides and insides of one another, we are torn apart by sin — by shame and self-centeredness. But mostly Lord, we are torn apart by fear — by our fear of being forgotten or lost or abandoned or rejected. Help us to ground ourselves in your love. Give us the courage to see you in others. Give us the even greater courage to let others see you in us. Give us the even greater courage to share our struggles and our faith with others, so that we may fill the hunger in our souls. Guide us, Lord Jesus, into full relationship with you. Let us be in communion with you. Amen.