

“Faith Connections”

**Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
Sunday, September 22, 2013**

**Old Testament Lesson – Romans 12:1-5
New Testament Lesson – Exodus 32:7-14**

It is said that when popular speaker Tony Campolo is flying to his next engagement, he doesn't worry too much about whether he will end up with chatty seatmates. If he is in the mood to talk, he tells them that he is a sociologist (which he is). If he is not in the mood to talk, he tells them he is a Baptist evangelist (which he also is).

It seems that even a spiritual man like Campolo can get so overwhelmed by the world around him that he'll hide his light under a bushel basket so to speak.

Sometimes we all reach a point where we just need to disconnect from the world. And that's fine. The danger is when we let the world push us to disconnect from our faith, because in doing that we disconnect from the best the world has to offer us, and what it is that we have to offer the world.

We live in a world of distractions and over-commitment. And in such a world, it can be hard to keep focused on what we are called to do – on those things that help build up the faith and enable us to minister to those in need.

For the Israelites of the Exodus, they faced a different challenge. They didn't have a lot of distractions, and their commitments were few. The Israelites lived in the wilderness. And their problem in the wilderness was there's nothing to guarantee personal safety and that they would have enough food to eat and water to drink.

Even though God had provided for all of this at the outset, they wanted a guarantee. They had forgotten or no longer trusted all that God had done for them already – manna from heaven, water from the rock, a cloud of spiritual protection that can overcome any real-world danger they might face, any struggle they – or we – might encounter.

In a world of uncertainty, they forget, because their faith is not strong enough to stand up to it. In the fear and uncertainty of the wilderness, with Moses up on the mountain and nowhere in sight, the Israelites decide to do things their way. They turn to false gods and settle for a false sense of security.

And God sees this and says to Moses, “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely.”

Did you hear what God just said to Moses – calling the Israelites “your people, whom you (Moses) brought up out of the land of Egypt?” When did the Israelites stop being God's people, whom God brought out of the land of Egypt?

When did their true identity and purpose in life become disconnected from God? Well, it happened the moment they forgot who God was and decided to do things their way. That's when they lost touch with their God-given purpose, their connection to God.

When we in this society forget who God is and decide to do things our way, we too become disconnected from God; we lose track of our God-given purpose. And that's when God throws our choices right back in our face, the choice to either recommit to God and to God's way of things, or to continue doing things our way, and to just keep running in circles, making no real progress.

God says to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you (Moses) I will make a great nation." God is going to wipe out the Israelites and start over with Moses.

Well, Thank God that Moses isn't interested in having things his way. Thank God Moses has faith in the way that God set things up from the beginning. Moses is quite happy following in the footsteps of those who have gone before, Abraham, Isaac, and Israel; with no need to set himself up as his own personal savior.

And yet, we do that sometimes, don't we? We think we have got all the answers – or that we're supposed to. And this leaves us feeling either superior, when we see ourselves as the one out in front of a situation; or inferior, when things don't work out our way. What we forget is that it's not about us. We're never really out in front of anything; God is always out ahead of us. So we don't have to do it all alone. We've got a God who is there for us, no matter what.

This is the faith that Moses displays. Moses doesn't rely on himself to get through life; he relies on God. Moses doesn't look to himself for the right answers; he follows God's way.

Moses maintains a connection with God that spans the generations and can cross any distance. Moses looks back on the history of his people – the history of God's people – and Moses sees that this is where his identity lies, this is where he finds his true purpose in life – not from the distractions of today nor the over-commitments of tomorrow, but from the faith of those who have gone before.

And so it is with us – we find our true identity and purpose by maintaining our connection to those, who in faith have gone before. But how do we do that? Instead of settling down in front of the TV or the computer after a long day, maybe we could sit in conversation with our loved ones, our family. Rather than going shopping for ourselves, how about shopping for those in need? Hanging with friends is cool, but cooler still is following in the footsteps of those who've made difference for others, by taking on a cause at school or out in the community.

Whatever way we can find to be of loving service to others is a good way to stay connected to our faith and pass it along the generations. And yet today, churches across the country are surrounded by people with no real connection to their faith.

These are the people who believe in God, but they have no way of connecting that belief to their lives and the lives of those they love – no real, hands-and-feet-of-Jesus connection that gives them a place to go when things get uncertain. Money gets tight, and they've got nowhere to turn. A loved one becomes ill and they're in it all alone. The kids are out of control, and they wonder, "Where'd they learn to act like that?"

When it comes to our identity as God's people, we've lost touch with our true purpose in life – maintaining our connection to God and helping each other to grow stronger in the faith. What are we thinking? What are we focused on in life if not our connection to God and our care for one another? What gets in the way?

You know, there's a Charlie Brown cartoon in which Lucy asks, "Why do you think we're put on earth, Charlie Brown?" Charlie replies, "To make others happy." "I don't think I'm making anyone very happy," says Lucy. "Of course, nobody is making me very happy either." And then in the final panel, we see Lucy turn to Charlie Brown and say: "Somebody's not doing his job!"

If you are not happy in life, it may be that somebody is not doing their job; and that somebody just might be you – us, as individuals. The truth of it is that when we really plug into our life's purpose, we find out that it's not about us at all, but rather, it's more about the people in our lives.

Whatever your life's purpose is, it won't be found by chasing after more personal happiness. Those who find their God-given purpose are those who stay connected to God in the first place.

Regardless of how difficult life is, regardless of how out of control things get, regardless of how disconnected we feel from those we love, God is faithful to bring us through it, when we stay connected to God, and through God, to one another.

Just like the ancient Israelites, we all turn our backs on God from time to time – that's the way it is in this world. And knowing this, God gives us a way to always find our way back – our faith connections. God never turns away from us. So all we need to do to be connected again with God is to reconnect with our faith. And to do that, we need to develop and maintain our faith, personally and across the generations.

Today, we baptized Layla Madeline Sturgis. Layla's connection to this church is deep and wide. It spans multiple generations and is tied to many individual families. And now, Layla Madeline has an even deeper and broader connection to her family of faith, a never-ending faith connection.

In baptism, we promise to develop and maintain our faith across the generations and over any distances. We promise that no matter what the world might throw at someone, he or she is still a precious child of God.

Maintaining such faith-based connections is not easy. Staying in touch with who you are as a child of God is not easy – the world will not do it for you, and in fact, it often gets in the way.

That's why our primary purpose in life is to examine and grow our faith in God. Even those who do a lot for the church can grow in who they are as a child of God. It's not always about doing more. Sometimes – and in fact always – its about who we are being in whatever we are doing.

So, let us all be reminded of our connection to God and to God's children, and let us challenge ourselves – wherever we can – to continue developing and growing our faith connections. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Lord God, you are the one who protects us our whole lives long, the one we follow through the wilderness of life, and the one we wait for now in this holy place.

But Lord, we are an impatient people, prone to distractions. When we spend too much time away from you, we tend to follow false gods, turn our attention and devotion to the objects around us: smartphones, iPads, videogames, sports teams, Facebook, you name it.

But at this moment, Lord, our phones are off; we are not connected to the Internet, and we are wanting to be connected to you. We seek a divine, sacred, awe-inspiring connection. Lord, do not give up on us. Grace us with your Holy presence.

We pray your spirit of healing and rejuvenation upon all those recuperating from surgery or injury, and especially upon Mike Hatcher, Mary Faye Fischer, Shirley Crick, Fred Royal.

We pray for those who need a job so they can simply buy food and put a roof over their heads.

We pray for all who are in need, whether spiritual, material, or emotional.

And we thank you, O Lord, for Jesus Christ who connects us to you. We thank you for the Word made flesh. We thank you for the guidance he gives and the salvation he brings. Help us to always be connected to you.

We pray all this using the words you taught us, saying together:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.