

John 15:1-8; Easter 5B; May 3, 2015

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Most of you know I flew to Maine on Wednesday for my husband's retirement party. After spending much of the day waiting in airports, I finally reached Portland around 10:18 PM. I met Ken in the baggage claim area where we waited for the luggage carousel to begin birthing suitcases of every size, shape and color. The luggage started coming and people began picking up their suitcases and leaving. Finally, Ken and I were the only ones left and my luggage never arrived. It supposedly was lost at the Philadelphia airport where I had spent time during a layover. Needless to say, I was not a happy camper. All of my personal care items, my dress for the party, everything, was in that suitcase somewhere in Philadelphia and I was in Maine. It was finally delivered about 4:30 the next day as we were getting ready to leave for the party. And then, guess what? On my return trip home, the same thing happened! After arriving in Detroit, I went to pick up my luggage and again, it was not there. It was lost someplace in Philadelphia! I was disturbed to say the least. I have to say that, following both incidents, I kept mulling over the situation and found myself feeling somewhat angry. Traveling and taking a journey can, at times, be very challenging. There are many connections that must be made. If connections work, traveling can be a great experience. However, if the necessary connections are not met, one's journey becomes frustrating to say the least.

Today's gospel reading is all about being connected and staying connected throughout this **life** journey we **all** travel. As we enter into today's gospel, the assigned reading brings us back to what is the evening of Maundy Thursday in John's account. Jesus knows he is about to go, leaving the disciples behind. So, he is urging them to

remain **in** him and **with** him, and remain in fellowship with each other. Jesus is telling the disciples and each one of us, “Stay connected and live in relationship to me, and stay connected and live in relationship to each other. Make your home in me just as I do in you. Continue on in my teaching and example and remain in **fellowship** with each other.”

Some people would say that in this age of technology we are becoming more connected to others than ever before. We may indeed have an increasing number of friends online whether it is through Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram. And, we can instantly connect to the latest news through websites, apps, email and social media. In fact, we can actually find ourselves overwhelmed by all of the information that is available to us at our fingertips. Yet, many sociologists would say we are finding ourselves increasingly **detached** from meaningful relationships. I think we all have experienced times and situations when we are with a group of people and several of those present are spending their time doing all kinds of “stuff” on their phones instead of entering into meaningful conversation with others. This is a regular occurrence even within our own families. The truth of the matter is that, while all of our gadgets and technology **seem** to keep us more connected, we are increasingly **disconnected** from real, authentic community. And, the end result is that loneliness, isolation and depression are skyrocketing. We are living in a time when people are becoming **starved** for the experience of living in real relationship with others.

There is a difference between merely being connected and living in actual relationship. The connectedness Jesus is speaking of is a connectedness that is only found through experiencing life together within the context of a faith community.

However, living in this kind of relationship is not easy. It can be difficult. Living in relationship with others requires give and take, such living requires us to be vulnerable. Living in relationship with others means there will be ups and downs as we travel this journey together. And, living life together in community means we have to put up with real people, some who are nice and some who are not, some who want things their way and others who don't want to challenge the status quo. Quite frankly, life together means having to put up with people who are sometimes jerks. And, let's be very honest about something – it also means recognizing and having to admit that sometimes **we** are the ones who are being the jerks. The truth is, real, authentic community is something we often would rather shy away from because it can be uncomfortable. And, like a little child who says, “Me do it myself,” we, too, would rather make this journey through life saying, “I can do this myself and I don't need anyone else.”

Relationships and life together within the context of community are not easy, but oh they are so very honest, authentic and real. Liking someone on Facebook will never replace walking with and being present to someone who is grieving, or someone who is battling cancer. Sending an email message can never replace being present to someone who is dying, or someone who is struggling with major life issues. Sending a message through social media will never replace being present to someone, speaking face to face and assuring them that God loves and accepts them exactly as they are.

This is the stuff of **real, authentic relationship**.

Jesus invites **us** to be real, to be deeply connected and live in intimate relationship with **him and with each other**. Jesus invites us to be honest about who we are and what we are. Jesus invites us to come together and confess our hopes and

fears, to share our dreams and disappointments, to be honest about our accomplishments **and** our failures, to be open about our blessings **and** our sin. In Jesus, we are invited **into** deep, authentic relationship with one another so that we can discover that we are accepted, loved and forgiven by God who loves this whole world enough to send the Son.

When we discover the depth of God's love for us, then we can truly love and accept each other, imperfections, flaws and all. It is here, in Christian community, that we learn what real love is all about. William Barclay was a Scottish Bible scholar. He once wrote, "Love is the binding power which holds the whole Christian body together. The tendency of any body of people is sooner or later to fly apart; and love is the one bond that will hold them together in unbreakable fellowship." Barclay's words are so true because it is love, the love that happens and is born when we live together in Christian community that enables us to then love others as we have been loved. And, it is that love that sends us **out** to make a difference in people's lives both here and around the world. Love becomes the **fruit** of living in relationship to God and others within the community of faith.

Kadin, Taylor, Owen and Samuel, today you will be making public affirmation of your baptism as you are confirmed into Christian faith. This is important, life-changing stuff! This is a life-giving commitment you will be making today. Confirmation is not like graduation. Confirmation is making a commitment to fully become part of the faith community, to become deeply connected and live into the relationship you find through participating in this Faith community. And, it is here where you will continue to discover the love that will enable you to live your faith in this world. Your lives will be changing in

big ways over the next few years. There will be high school, college, jobs, all kinds of family relationships that will evolve and change as you grow. And, as you continue to grow, I challenge you to keep asking the questions. Keep on exploring a life of faith and live those questions. That is what faith is about and it is important to do this by staying connected and living in relationship to God and to all of us.

When you were baptized, one of the members representing the congregation lit a candle and gave it to you saying, "Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." And now, in just a few minutes I, along with members of your family, will lay our hands upon your head and we will be asking God to stir up in you the gift of the Holy Spirit, empower you to serve others, give you patience in the challenges you will face throughout life, and guide you into life that truly matters. And, this will happen as you live in relationship to God and as we live in relationship to each other. Just as a light bulb needs to be plugged into a source that will provide electricity so it can be a light in the darkness, each of you will find that staying connected and living in relationship to God and the faith community will enable your lights of love to shine in this world.

So, today, as you affirm your faith, I have a little gift for you. It is not a very interesting gift, but it is something that I hope will remind you of the importance of staying connected and living in relationship to God and one another. This little light is one that you plug into a power source and it lights your way. However, it also keeps itself charged so that when the power goes out, it will still provide light. There will be times in your life when you will face a certain darkness. However, this little light can remind you that when you stay connected and live in relationship to God and others,

you will find light and love for your journey. Kadin, Taylor, Owen and Samuel, God loves you more than you can ever imagine and God **will** guide you along the way. As we continue to live together in relationship to God and one another, I eagerly look forward to watching how the light of God's love will continue to grow in you, and how that love will shine here in this place and wherever your journey takes you.