

Connecting

IN A
Disconnecting
WORLD

Stories of Loss, Loneliness and the Grace of God

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Introduction

This collection of reflections focuses upon what it means to be “connected”, that is connected to one another, to family, to community, and to God; together with the rich spiritual experience that such connections can bring.

In spite of living through a time of phenomenal advances in technologies designed to bring people together, face-to-face conversation is becoming an endangered species of communication. People for some reason are actually getting together less than they did twenty years ago. As a result, communities, neighbourhoods, and churches are in pain and social decline.

In his book, *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam of Harvard University reports, “for the first two thirds of the twentieth century, a powerful tide has borne North America into an even deeper engagement in the life of their communities; but a few decades ago silently, without warning, that tide reversed and we were over taken by a treacherous riptide. Without at first noticing, we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities.” According to Putnam, social indicators of volunteerism, church attendance, political involvement, and club membership are all in decline. People are not joining anymore, and as a result, there is a loss of connection personally, socially, and yes, spiritually.

Such a trend is troubling because the very fabric of our lives depends so much on relationships of a deep and intimate kind. We do not “bowl” alone or love alone or worship alone; we do so in community. If these communities are threatened, our lives will be the poorer for it.

The purpose of the present book is to place our troubling situation against the background of the intentionality of Jesus of Nazareth and to see in the New Testament record, His way of relating to people. He focused especially on those who were painfully disconnected from their communities, their families, and from a religious system that had failed to be a connecting network. It was the premise of Jesus that each one of us is created for connection, for community, for relationship with the Other.

The book will introduce you to people caught in the *disconnects* of grief, guilt, hurt and hopelessness, and how this man from Nazareth feels it is His business to be touching people, as well as reconnecting them with communities that can nurture their restored lives.

If you, like me, sense in your own life some loss of connection, then read on!

Bill Hockin

A Little Child with Big Connections

The family tree of Jesus Christ, David's son, Abraham's son: Abraham had Isaac, Isaac had Jacob, Jacob had Judah and his brothers . . . Jacob had Joseph, Mary's husband, the Mary who gave birth to Jesus, the Jesus who was called Christ.

Matthew 1

One of the great joys of the Christmas season, and conversely one of the great sorrows, has to do with our connections. When December comes, we feel an inner pressure to connect with friends and family. We do it traditionally by cards and those infamous Christmas letters. We phone people. We have more parties than at any other time of the year. We go out for dinner. We may even go to church in higher numbers, not just to listen to the pretty music, but to be connected or reconnected to something or Someone. Some of us are happy to go along for the ride, albeit unsure of the reason. There is a certain deep something in December that says, "Let's get together; let's overcome our differences; let's be connected." Therefore, values like love, peace and joy get a lot of fresh "air time".

The other side of all this is, of course, that our disconnects take on an even deeper sadness. If we are estranged from anyone, if we are unable to connect with friends or relatives, or if we have lost a loved one, we are left with a profoundly cold and empty feeling. Particularly, if we are alone in life, Christmas can be an even lonelier experience.

The good thing about the season for many of us is that it doesn't last all that long! By Boxing Day we are back to living with our disconnects in a realistic way – going shopping, sleeping it off, or whatever deadens the memory.

Embedded within the mystery of Christmas, whether we are believers or not, there is a pull to connect. At the heart of this pull is a little child with great connections. This person, Jesus of Nazareth, is still standing in our world like some magnetic field trying to draw people together.

Within the Christmas story told by Matthew and Luke, is what we call genealogies. Matthew begins his gospel with sixteen long verses of a family tree which connects baby Jesus back to Abraham. Luke does the same in fourteen verses connecting him all the way back to Adam. While Luke provides a pedigree of actual descent, Matthew gives the names of the family tree, including not only kings and nobility, but also a few skeletons in the Old Testament closet, names like Rahab, the prostitute, and Bethsheba, that “other woman” in David's life.

A few of the names in the genealogies are saints, but Matthew and Luke are saying that Jesus comes from a highly significant human gene pool stretching all the back to the fathers and mothers of Judaism and humanity. They are saying “This baby in the manger on a back street of Bethlehem is a very ‘well-connected’ little boy. To ignore him would be foolish indeed.” The gospel writers, especially John, go on to say even more. As well as having notable human ancestors, Jesus of Nazareth has a mysterious connection with God himself. According to John's gospel, “the word of God was made flesh and he lived among us full of grace and truth.” John makes no bones about it. Jesus said, “I and the father are one. If you have seen me, you have seen the father.” The claim of the New Testament is that this little child has a lot of great connections. During his lifetime he spent all of his energy trying to reconnect people with God and with each other. His

chief mission statement is “Love God with everything you have and love your neighbour as much as you love yourself.”

His two “best sellers” on the subject are the parable about a lost son who disconnects with his family (but later reconnects with them), and the parable about a good Samaritan, who unlike two others, showed compassion to a wounded victim lying on the side of the road. The Samaritan connects to the victim in a generous and extravagant way. So many of the stories of the gospels are about His mission to connect people, first with God and then with each other.

In contrast to this, disconnection is a theme that prevails in our contemporary culture. We see it in film; we hear it in popular music; we witness it in public life; where people live with this disconnection between their faith and their morality. In a song entitled “Disconnect” by the heavy metal band, “Megadeth”, some of the lines are about turning off your conscience and leaving the world outside, because absolutely nothing can make you feel so real. In other words, you just disconnect. It is the story of living in the lonely crowd of “bowling alone”, the “malaise of modernity” to quote only a few titles on the subject. It describes the loss of community; the loss of the glue that keeps people together.

One of the more significant films of 2005 was the film, “Crash”, written and directed by Paul Haggis. True to its title, the movie begins with a car crash and ends the same way. In between is the story of disconnections and then reconnections. The setting is urban Los Angeles. The players, which include whites, blacks, Latinos, Koreans, Iranians, cops and criminals, the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless, are all defined by their disconnect from each other. It is a disconnect that results in fear and violence.

In the second half of the film, through small windows of random kindness, the lights of connectedness and reconciliation begin to flicker through the fog of racism and sexism. And the walls that divide start to crumble. The significance of

the title, “Crash”, is the author’s idea that in such a divided and disconnected world, the only way people actually come together is by accident, by “running into each other.” The value of the film is in its vivid portrayal of disconnected lives, and how we can overcome obstacles which divide us, by doing simple things, like reaching out and caring for each other even when that caring gets risky.

Two of my favourite Christmas stories: *The Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens and *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* by Dr. Suess, begin with the chief characters seriously disconnected from themselves and from others. Both stories end around a Christmas dinner table – Scrooge with his formerly estranged nephew, and the Grinch with the Whos – reconnected by a force beyond themselves, a force rooted in this little child and his big connections.

Professor of Old Testament, Walter Bruggeman, suggests that the stories of the Bible are to be seen as stories with the power to redefine our lives, which thereby authorize people to abandon other stories that have shaped their lives in a false or distorted way. Many of us live under the influence of stories that include a profound commitment to brokenness and division, whether by race, economic class, gender, or religion. I grew up living just fifteen kilometers south of a First Nations community. It was a place in those days where you didn’t go. It was regarded as a solitude separate from ours, and it was only later as an adult and as a Christian that I saw something very wrong about that view. All of us live under the shadow of stories that divide and separate us racially and religiously from our fellow human beings. The results are fear, ignorance or suspicion.

Let’s consider another story, as an alternative, that might redefine the way we think of people that may be disconnected from us. This story comes from John’s gospel, fourth chapter, and is often called the story of the Woman at the Well. Like Paul Haggis’ film, “Crash”, it is about two people who just

happen to run into each other, about so much that divides them and of what can bring them together. The Samaritan woman and a Jewish rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, meet at a community well. It was a well with a long and noble tradition of providing water for a very arid part of the country.

The Samaritan woman gets there first, and when Jesus arrives, he asks her if she would give him a little water, as he has no cup. It would have been so simple and even generous for her to give him the water and then walk away, but she felt compelled to confront him with a few realities! “How come you, a Jewish man, is asking me, a Samaritan woman, for a cup of water? Aren’t you afraid you might catch something?” What she does is simply express the narrative she has lived by. Her three identifiers – race, gender and religion – all point to who she is and what divides her from him, “I, a Samaritan woman, you, a Jewish man”. Jews and Samaritans had a long history of separation, fear, hate and suspicion not to mention the disconnect between men and women. All she was doing was naming her defining story.

Refusing to play the race card, Jesus responds with an invitation for her to taste a different kind of water than something she would find in the well, something that would satisfy a deeper need in her life. He says, “I know of a living water, if you’re interested.” She responds by asserting the value of her well, “This well”, she points out, “has been in our family for generations. After all, Jacob drank from this well. How can you do better than that?”

Sensing that she does not get it, Jesus becomes a little more personal and asks, “Is your husband nearby? I’d love to meet him.” “Oh,” she says, “I don’t have a husband.” Many men might have interpreted her response as an invitation to go home with her, but not this man! Instead, he looks at her with his all-knowing, all-accepting eyes and says, “Yes, I know. You’ve had five husbands and are now living with a sixth.” Talk about having your soul laid bare. It was not a comfort-

able moment for her. Some of us know the pain of one divorce, but can you imagine five? Five rejections, five failures, five times searching for Mr. Right and not finding him. This is a history of disconnect and this lady knew all about it.

Note how Jesus dealt with her. There's no rejection, no walking away, no preaching. Instead, he stays with her trying to build some sort of common ground where they can relate on a higher level. The woman quickly changes the subject to religion, a little safer she thought. "You sound like a preacher," she observes. After some inter-faith dialogue as to where the best church could be found, she finishes off by saying: "Well, some day the Messiah will come. He'll sort it all out. I guess we'll have to wait for him." Jesus looks at her again and perhaps smiling says, "Well, we won't have to wait long. I, who speak to you am he."

Jesus is trying to counter her story of disconnect with an alternative that would cut through the barriers of race, gender and religion. He does it with sensitivity, compassion and truth. The story continues – she went home that afternoon and started talking with her neighbours about a man who, unlike other men in her life, accepted her as she was and did not take advantage of her. Instead, he, "Told me everything I ever was."

When we take this story and see it as an alternative to our learned stories of multi-level disconnect, it offers some very hopeful options as to how we might live. Here we have Jesus engaging with this woman, who tries her best to put up walls of difference between them. Jesus does everything he can to transcend those differences and connect with her on a deeper level. He does that finally by confirming her hope in a Messiah. If Samaritans and Jews had one thing in common, it was their hope for a Messiah, and Jesus tells her, "I, who speak to you, am he." That claim could have been a conversation-stopper but it wasn't. Instead the woman leaves her water jar at the well and goes home to tell everyone, "Come and meet a man!"

Here's a story that challenges the tragic history of racism and religious intolerance too often done in His name. It does so not by holding up principles or even a book, but by holding up the Messiah, the Christ, this little child with great connections.

Every December for the last few years, there seems to be a growing loss of Christian content in our cultural celebration of Christmas. While we mourn that, we must, at the same time, take some responsibility for it. Over the last centuries Christian behaviour towards each other has not been a ringing endorsement of our togetherness or connectedness or unity.

A story that at the beginning seems to prove that point is one told of three American soldiers in 1944 engaged in the Battle of the Bulge in Europe. They were friends, and in that terrible battle, one of them was killed. His two friends wanted to do the right thing and bury him in a proper cemetery. Nearby was a church and a cemetery. They asked the priest for permission to bury their friend in the cemetery. "Is he baptized?" the priest asked. "No," they said, "he's Jewish." "I'm sorry," the priest responded, "but the rules won't allow me to bury him in consecrated ground." So, the two friends dug a grave just outside the picket fence of the cemetery and buried their friend there. Because of the enemies' advance they had to withdraw for the night. In the morning they had reason to walk by the cemetery again. To their dismay, there was no sign of their friend's grave. Then they noticed that there was a fresh grave just inside the fence. Upon closer examination they realized that someone during the night had moved the fence to include their friend.

That story, which began so negatively, illustrates both the shame of our disconnect and the action we can take. Frankly, we have a lot of "fence moving" to do. We do that not by renegotiating about what is our truth, but by looking to the example of the Christ and of Christmas, and how He "moved the fences" to include each of us.

This little child with great connections continues to challenge the different layers of our disconnectedness. My prayer for all of us is that we may run into Him at Christmas and find the connectedness that will bring us peace, joy and love.

When Someone Calls You By Name

There was a man there, his name was Zaccheus, the head tax man and quite rich. He wanted desperately to see Jesus, but the crowd was in his way – he was a short man and couldn't see over the crowd. So, he ran on ahead and climbed up a sycamore tree so that he could see Jesus when he came by. When Jesus got to the tree, he looked up and said, "Zaccheus, hurry down. Today is my day to be a guest in your home."

Luke 19

According to my reading of the New Testament, Jesus of Nazareth and those who followed him worked very hard at building what modern social scientists call “social capital. His method was not writing books or tracts and handing them out at street corners. On the contrary, he engaged people one at a time building connections that countered the dysfunction of their disconnects that often led to the creation of new relationships with Him and with a new community.

Many of the stories of these encounters tell of people who live with a loss of relationship; who live with isolation, hurt and loneliness. Through this encounter with Jesus, they are able to move into the mainstream of society and find, to their utter delight, not only a friend in Jesus who cares for them but a community of like-minded people centred in Him, who are prepared to embrace and call them friend.

Spiritually speaking, disconnection is nothing new in the human experience. It's as old as Eden, where our first parents lost a great deal of social capital and found themselves sud-

denly afraid, ashamed, disconnected from God who had been the very source of their being. One might say that the whole thrust of the Biblical narrative is the story of God reaching out to humanity, trying desperately to reconnect with us.

In this second chapter we are looking at the story of Zaccheus found in Luke, Chapter Nineteen. According to the text, Zaccheus was not just any old tax collector but a manager of tax collectors. He was one of the assistant deputy ministers of the local Roman Ministry of Finance! That gave him privileges. In today's world he would have a key to the Executive Lounge. He had access to people in high places. On that score, he was certainly well-connected and as a result, was very well off; lived in a nice neighbourhood and belonged to the best fitness club in town. But, he was a tax collector! He was a man working for an occupying power and to most of his neighbours he was despised. Therefore, "well-connected" was a relative term applied to Zaccheus. He had probably lost a lot of good relationships with his extended family. His siblings perhaps refused to talk to him. His own children may have pretended to belong to somebody else. Zaccheus had compromised his conscience for the sake of the affluent life. As well as this, he was "vertically challenged". Luke, for some reason, mentions that he was a short man. Like most of us, he was less than perfect and perhaps the butt of many jokes. His life was perhaps one of quiet desperation, going along for the ride, thinking there was no way out.

In Margaret Lawrence's classic novel, *The Stone Angel*, Hagar Shipley now an older woman recalls her past life, a life that has brought her to a "shattering bitterness." She recalls how she might have arrived at such a sad place. "Why is it that I never could rejoice? Every good joy I might have had, in my man, or in any child or even of walking on the Earth, all were forced to a standstill by some break of proper appearances. Pride was my wilderness and the demon that had led me there was fear. I was alone, never anything else, and

never free for I carried my chains within me and they spread out from me and shackled all I touched.” (Ronald Rolheiser, *The Restless Heart*, page 37) The disconnections of our lives are deeper, you see, than just a short Christmas card list. I remember a woman telling me of her husband, who had a Christmas card list of five hundred but not one close friend. As in the case of Zaccheus, we can be “well-connected” in terms of our place of work, our membership at the club or even the church. We can have all that and yet miss out on that “joy” that Hagar talks about, that deep loneliness brought on by fear, carrying those chains within—that “shackle” everything we touch.

However, one day Zaccheus gets a break. Jesus of Nazareth comes to town. Zaccheus must have heard of him, knew of his reputation and wanted to see him. There’s no indication that he wanted anything more. He would have been content to just be in the crowd and perhaps overhear what Jesus said. The crowd was tall and he couldn’t see and so he does this bizarre thing, climbing a sycamore tree and sitting there holding on. For anyone walking down the street, he was a hard target to miss. Jesus must have smiled when he saw him there. As far as we can tell, Zaccheus had no intention of engaging Jesus; no intention of changing anything in his life, all he wanted was a good look.

There are a lot of people who want only to look at religion. They love the colour, the ritual, even the music that goes with it, and the odd good speaker. They will buy a c.d. of the Kings College Choir or gospel music by Bill Gaither but never intend to go any further. They go to church, when they do go, just to see. That’s all Zaccheus does. Certainly, he wasn’t happy with his disconnected life. However, he never made the connection between that and the person he went out on that limb – just to see! Here he gets the shock of his life. This man, this preacher from Nazareth, stops right under his tree and calls him by name. For all we know, Matthew, one of Jesus’ disciples, who

also was a tax collector had known Zaccheus from his former life. Maybe he had worked for him and maybe Matthew was walking beside Jesus, when he spied his old boss “out on that limb”! However he knew, Jesus stops by the tree and names him, “Zaccheus,” he called, “it’s time for me to meet you. Get off that limb and take me home for lunch.”

It is a powerful thing for someone, to whom you just want to have a look, to look back at you, call you by name, and invite you to spend time together. That’s what connection is all about. It’s the very thing that a lot of us have lost or maybe never had: Someone who wants the best for us, who calls us by name and takes us home to get to know us better. It’s an invitation you really can’t refuse because that act of calling somebody by name implies knowledge and acceptance. It must have blown Zaccheus completely away. What he heard in those words from Jesus was this complete acceptance, this all-embrace not only of his present but also of his shameful past. Jesus was saying, “I want to connect with you. We have things to talk about. A new life begins at your kitchen table today. I want to be there and I hope you can be there, too.”

It’s a story with a lot of heart to it and it’s in our hearts where true connectedness begins. It begins with someone very important, someone like God saying to us, “I know your past, I know all about your flaws, your failed relationships, your disconnects but I love you passionately anyway.” As Pope Benedict said a few years ago, “Each one of us is the result of a thought of God, each of us loved, each of us wanted, each of us necessary.” Zaccheus gets the invitation of a lifetime, an invitation to connect, a connect that would challenge the many disconnects of his life. Zaccheus accepts the invitation!

According to the text, “Zaccheus scrambled out of the tree, hardly believing his good luck, delighted to take Jesus home with him.” Jesus knew that connections are made when you sit at the table with one another.

One of the sad trends of our present culture in North America is that times together at table with friends are in sad decline. According to Robert Putnam, “Visits with friends are now on the social capital endangered species list.” In the period from 1975 to 1999 visits at the homes of friends went from 40% to 25%. Visits by couples and families to restaurants also declined giving way to fast food outlets where far less time is spent together. As well as that, the once traditionally important form of families together at the evening meal is in major decline, from 50% of families in 1975 to only 30% now. I believe that something very dear and vital is lost here, not just a nice tradition but a vital part in friends and families finding those necessary connections, connections that maintain our relationships and our own well-being.

This story in Luke, the story of Zaccheus, doesn't tell us much about what happened over lunch although something very powerful must have happened. The text says, “Zaccheus stood up and said, ‘I want to tell you, Jesus, that as of today half my wealth I give to the poor and if I have cheated anyone, I will reimburse them four times.’” This new connectedness that Zaccheus was experiencing with Jesus started new connections not only on the vertical with God but on the horizontal level, as well. Can you imagine the look on the face of the Director of the local foodbank? Zaccheus had become his new best friend! This generosity also signaled remorse for past wrongs, repentance for his past and a willingness to change by establishing these new lateral connections in the community.

In summary, what does this story tell us? First of all, it might remind us that our social capital is in trouble; that the connections, the quality of relationships might be in jeopardy. Social disengagement is not a good thing; loneliness and the lack of trust in others is not part of a healthy life. A Christmas card list of five hundred, yet not one good friend to have dinner with is not a connected life. Second, all of this has a deep

spiritual root to it. The malaise of our lives, its quiet desperation, has everything to do with a deep disconnect with God. Until that disconnect is corrected, there is “no health in us.” Thirdly, the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth as recorded in the New Testament is all about new connections with him and with each other. In the case of Zaccheus it is He who takes the initiative, He who calls us by name, He who recognizes who we really are, who accepts us warts and all. He then invites us to go further, invites himself into our homes and our lives. By doing so, He makes it possible for us to reconnect with others. Fourth, there is always a cost to building social and spiritual capital. The crowd that day wasn’t at all certain that connecting with Zaccheus was good for Jesus. In spite of that, transformation happened resulting in a generosity that felt very good for Zaccheus not to mention his community. Fifth, there was this benefit. Jesus said, “Salvation has come to this house today.” This disconnect, that had plagued Zaccheus for so long, had itself been unplugged and in its place there was a healing of relationship with God and with his community.

Finally, our church communities probably remain the best place to find that level of connectedness that we need to sustain our very lives. I say that knowing more than most about the church community: its dysfunction, its pettiness at times and its many failures. It, however, is the place where we take time to hear God speak to us. It is place where we are invited to a table and offered food for life’s journey. It is the place where we meet together, all of us different but truly one in him. As well, it is the place where we are challenged to change our lives, called to kneel down, admitting our disconnects and our longing for something better. Above all, it is in our Christian communities, as it was for Zaccheus, where we find our new best friend, Jesus of Nazareth, hear him calling us by name, sense him inviting himself into our lives and giving us a joy that no one can take from us, a love that will never let us go.

Someone Who Wipes the Tears Away

Not long after that, Jesus went to the village Nain. His disciples were with him, along with quite a large crowd. As they approached the village gate, they met a funeral procession – a woman’s only son was being carried out for burial. And the mother was a widow. When Jesus saw her, his heart broke. He said to her, “Don’t cry.” Then he went over and touched the coffin. The pallbearers stopped. He said, “Young man, I tell you: Get up.” The dead son sat up and began talking. Jesus presented him to his mother.

Luke 7: 11-15

Dr. John McKnight in his book, *The Careless Society, Community and Its Counterfeits*, argues that one of the reasons we have lost many of our grassroots connections is that we have professionalized our care for one another. We have put the business of that care into the hands of professionals, who read your name off a chart, who refer to you as client/customer/patient rather than neighbour or friend. He contends that community is where care really happens.

McKnight tells the story of a small town on the prairies, a community of about eight hundred people. When a death happens, all the farmers and townsfolk gather with the family to mourn. Neighbours and kin join the bereaved in lamentation, prayer and song. The bereaved call upon the words of the clergy and surround themselves with community. Through their mourning, they are assured of the bonds between them and these bonds support and carry them. Their

grief is common property; they draw strength from one another and their community and in time move ahead.

One day a new innovation arrives in town – the bereavement counselor. She assures the prairie folk of her effectiveness and superiority by invoking the name of the university that she is from. At first, the little community is puzzled but then it tests this new innovation. She is kind and although the bereavement counselor doesn't live in the community, she has regular hours in a local office. Then one day, the aged father of a local woman dies and the next-door neighbour does not drop in with her casserole because she doesn't want to interrupt the grief counselor. The woman's kin will stay away because they've been told that the grief counselor knows best. They now feel inadequate to the job. Even the clergy seek advice because they, too, feel inadequate. What happens over time is that the community of mourners disappears, attendance at funerals declines, a sense of connection declines. One day, the grief counselor takes a job elsewhere! Because there is no budget in the community finances for grief work anymore, it all ends. In its place, community, as it was, is gone and every one must look out for themselves. It is not a place where people want to live anymore and, as time goes on, the community disappears. This tale tells of the benefit of our social connections and what we lose when, for whatever reason, they are compromised. I'm sure, however, that John McKnight sees a positive place for grief counselors but not as a replacement for community.

Some of you have known the pain of loss and grief. It is an emotion that we have when we lose anything: our health, our work, our marriage, a friendship, a community, or our spouse. Small towns have grieved over the loss of transportation, the central school, a doctor or a church. Each one of these losses is an attack on the health of the community, a family or a group of believers. If the connectedness is weak and fragile already, the possibility for good things is in grave danger.

The gospel story that I want to discuss in this chapter is found in Luke, chapter seven. It is the story of a widow who is experiencing the death of her only son and of her walk to the cemetery. Widows in New Testament times lived in desperate conditions and were totally dependent with very few people to support them. Men were the only source of support and in this story the woman had lost both men in her life – first her husband and now her only son. As the text says, “A crowd of people was with her.” The community had rallied around her; the neighbours had dropped in; she was not alone. One of the things that mourners will often tell you is how overwhelmed they were with the number of people who come to the funeral home or the church to bring condolence and comfort. However, the level of support depends on how active those people were in the community; how connected they were. A colleague told me once of conducting a funeral where only one person came. It was one of those occasion when the funeral home calls requesting a priest and he had made himself available. He was told there was no visitation only the service. It was Wednesday at 2:00 p.m. He arrived early to meet the family and only the widow was there. As 2:00 p.m. arrived, he asked her if they should wait. “No.” she responded, “We were a tight couple. We were everything for each other. We had no children, no friends and no church - we liked it that way.” So, the two of them sat together in the front pew of the funeral chapel, read scripture, prayed and then went to the crematorium. A few weeks later, my colleague followed up with the widow and suggested a visit. She declined.

Certainly, that is not the story here in Luke, chapter seven. The widow from Nain, in her grief, had a crowd of people around her. As the story goes, this crowd is intersected by yet another crowd, a crowd around Someone else. Imagine one crowd heading to the cemetery and another crowd heading in the very opposite direction. One crowd was supporting this grieving mother and the other surrounding a

preacher from Nazareth. The moods of these two crowds could not be more different. While one crowd is caught up in loss and grief, the other is caught up in listening to Jesus and his good news – life-giving news about the kingdom of God. One crowd is centered in death, the other in life. The one invades the other and the two become one. According to Luke’s text, when Jesus saw the woman, “his heart went out to her.” “Don’t cry,” he said. He then went up to the coffin and said, “Young man, I say to you, ‘Get up’.” Then the boy got up, began to talk and went to his mother.”

One of the insights that we can draw from this story is that there are communities that act as if death were the one great reality. On the other hand, there are communities that affirm life as that reality. We see both of them in the story. All of us belong to a variety of communities. We’re all connected in some way, some of us are well-connected, some less so. We have family, friends, neighbourhood, and work connections. But there are differences in our social circles. There are communities that are “life-giving” and there are those who are not. There are social connections that encourage, support, and genuinely care about us and there are those who don’t.

Reflecting on the story in our text, we could very well ask ourselves, “Where are the ‘life-giving’ communities in our lives? Where do we actually experience a community where “someone’s heart goes out to us and says don’t cry” and as a result something that is lost and almost buried in us comes alive again?”

There is no question that the nature of the communities we belong to, the level of connectedness we enjoy has a profound effect on our well-being. In study after study, there is strong evidence that the more one is connected to regular club attendance, volunteering, entertaining or church attendance, the better our health will be. The findings of a team of researchers at Carnegie Mellon University found that people with more diverse social ties get fewer colds! Stroke victims

who had strong support networks functioned better after their stroke. Older people who are involved in club activity, volunteer work and local politics as well as church are in generally better health than those who are uninvolved. It is, therefore, of much concern to those who study such things, that social capital has been in decline over the last twenty years. It is thus not surprising that, as our level of social connectedness declines, so does our health and well being. Maybe the Beatles got it right, “we all need a little help from our friends.” Since the time that song was written, personal satisfaction among adult North Americans has declined steadily. Roughly half the decline is associated with the loss of social connectedness. According to Robert Putnam, “Young and middle-aged adults are simply less likely to have friends over for dinner, attend church, volunteer or go to clubs. They are simply less socially involved than were their parents.”

Of all of the various crisis in our lives, none is a cause of disconnection more than grief, grief over the loss of someone close. Elaine Pagels in her book, *Beyond Belief*, tells the story of finding a life-giving community when she needed it most. She and her husband had been told that their young son had a terminal lung disease. She writes, “On a bright Sunday morning, while jogging in downtown New York, I stepped in the vaulted vestibule of the Church of the Heavenly Rest to catch my breath and to warm up. Since I had not been in church for a long time, I was startled by my response to the worship in progress. I stood watching, strangely attracted, and a thought came to me. Here is a family that knows how to face death. Here is a place to weep. Here was a mixed and diverse community that had gathered to sing, to celebrate, to acknowledge common needs and to deal with what we cannot control or imagine.” She continues, “I returned to that church many times. What I found surprised me. It was always an experience of wonder, mystery, community and joy, something that took me deeper and magnified my life. In that Church I gath-

ered new energy and a new ability to face the death that was to come.”

There are four marks of life-giving community that we find in Luke’s story of the widow from Nain. These are marks that apply to church communities but also to other gatherings that support us. First, the mark of an effective community is that it is principled or centered, meaning that it stands for something or Someone. In the case of our story, it is clearly Jesus Christ who is the center of this crowd, this life-giving community. It is centered in his principles of love for God and neighbour. It is Jesus who is the voice of the community, whose heart goes out to the widow in her grief and wipes away her tears. These are communities that stand for something, that have a powerful center that attracts, nurtures and feeds.

The second mark of a life-giving community is that they are open to change. They expect people to move from a life centered in the power of negativity and perhaps death to a life centered in hope and possibility. These communities are places of hope for something better. In the gospel story quoted, a woman began her day in despair and loss and ended it in healing and restoration. If you’ve ever been to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, you may remember hearing stories of miracles, peoples’ lives turned around. For church communities, one of the best advertisements that it can ever have is that of a changed life, where people share their stories of how, in worship and in small groups, their lives have turned around by the power of the Holy Spirit. Communities that are life-giving need to be places open and expectant for God’s spirit to free people from their burdens. As it says in Isaiah, chapter sixty-one, “to hear good news for the poor, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for captives, release for prisoners – that instead of ashes, you get a crown of beauty, instead of mourning, you get the oil of gladness, instead of a spirit of despair you get the garment of praise.”

The third mark of a life-giving community is that it is a place where one can be vulnerable; show one's feelings and emotions, where both the tears of grief and the tears of joy are celebrated. In our story the widow was permitted to cry; mourning was essential in first century Israel. Grief counselors can be very helpful here when they welcome the tears and say to us that it's okay to cry.

I remember the story of a mother, a faithful church member, who for months had been praying for her young daughter who was estranged from her and her family. One early Sunday morning she gets a call from her daughter saying that she was in town and would like to see her. Her mother responded that she would be in church from 10:00 to 11:00 a.m. and could she meet her afterward outside? They agreed. You can imagine what the mother was feeling. It was about two-thirds of the way through the service, when suddenly the priest stopped the liturgy. All eyes turned to a young woman coming down the aisle alone, looking from side to side for a familiar face. The mother saw her, got out into the aisle, and they embraced in tears. Instead of going on with the liturgy, the priest, aware of the situation, started to clap and the congregation joined in, moving into the aisle, surrounding them both. Now, I know we wouldn't expect that to happen every Sunday but this is what you call a life-giving community. There was a moment of healing there that no one would ever forget.

Finally, such a community needs to be open and inclusive, compassionate and caring for the broken-hearted, the seeker, the inquisitive, the weak, and the vulnerable. One Christmas Eve in a Toronto church where I once served, a young man came in, knapsack on his back and toque on his head. He sat down in the front pew and said, "Hey, what's happening, dude?" "It's Christmas Eve," I responded, "and we're getting ready to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ." After a moment he said, "What do I have to do to qualify to

come?” You can imagine the range of possible answers that went through my head. For some reason, by God’s grace, these words came out, “You just need to be hungry for God, my friend. I hope you come.”

For that widow who had lost both her husband and her son, this community of people centered in Jesus Christ, expectant and full of hope, open to the inclusiveness of Jesus Christ, reached out to her, embraced her and wiped away her tears.

Forgiving Your Painful Past

They brought a paraplegic to Jesus, carried by four men. When they weren't able to get in because of the crowd, they removed part of the roof and lowered the paraplegic on his stretcher. Impressed by their bold belief, Jesus said to the paraplegic, "Son, I forgive your sins." Some religious scholars sitting there started whispering among themselves. "He can't talk that way. That's blasphemy. God and only God can forgive sins."

Mark 2

In Carol Shield's last novel, *Unless*, she opens with these words, "Happiness is not what I thought. Happiness is that lucky pane of glass you carry in your head. It takes all your cunning just to hang onto it. Once it's smashed, you move into a different sort of life." It's true that, for many of us, happiness is some sort of ideal or dream that we need to protect at all costs. Like that pane of glass in our heads, we're afraid of saying something foolish or something that offends. We have this idea of how we want people to see us and we're afraid of the day when they are disappointed. That is the day when the glass is shattered and we are exposed for who we really are. Since reading that novel several years ago, I have thought about the image many times and realized how unhealthy that understanding of happiness is.

In these past chapters, we have been talking about the value of connection, value of belonging to networks that enrich and feed our souls and how the failure to do so can

cause deep unhappiness and be a serious threat to our health and well being. Certainly, for some of us, our failure to be connected may be associated with our desire to keep that pane of glass, our happiness intact, by avoiding social engagements because we fear being hurt. We withdraw and move off the front porches of our homes, where we may feel exposed, and move to the back decks where it's safer, sheltered and private and where we're less likely to get hurt.

Several years ago, in *The Globe and Mail*, there was a front page story of the social life in the suburbs of our big cities. The headline read, "Alienation, Stress and Turmoil Invades the Promised Land." The article quoted a recent newcomer from Asia saying, "At home we lived within the people, well-connected to our communities, but here in our \$600,000 home, we live within the walls, disconnected and very anxious." This is true not only for recent immigrants; it's true for anyone who is cut off from community. A kind of inner paralysis can set it. That pane of glass in your head may still be intact, but at great cost. This chapter is about the subject of guilt and reconciliation. It's about reconnecting with reality and with God and finding that through honest engagement with other people and with God.

The story I use to illustrate comes from Mark's gospel, a story about how Jesus of Nazareth connects with a paralyzed man by forgiving him. Jesus comes home to Capernaum and crowds gather to hear him preach. People fill every room in the house: kitchen, living room, dining room, front porch and back porch. There is standing room only and people are straining to hear his message. Some folks arrive late and the only room left is on the front lawn. Among the latecomers were four young men carrying a friend on a stretcher. They knew that they had to get closer if Jesus was going to meet their friend and help him. Because no one in the crowd would move (after all they got there first) the four men had to be inventive. As the text records, they climb up on the roof and

after digging through the shingles, lowered their friend with ropes down to where Jesus was speaking. You might imagine the reaction of those on the main floor. That would certainly shorten any good sermon! I'm sure some of the crowd was a tad annoyed. Jesus was just on his third point, when the roof started to break up! Can you imagine the paralyzed man on the stretcher? A little red in the face, apologizing as he hits the floor, "Sorry to interrupt the service, folks." According to Mark, Jesus doesn't delay. He looks at the man, probably held his hand and said, "Son, you are forgiven." Then, according to the text, while the man on the stretcher is dealing with those interesting words, Jesus is reading a set of negative thoughts from some of the orthodox teachers in the crowd about his right to forgive anyone. Jesus responds, "The Son of man has authority on Earth to do just that, forgive people their sins." Then, turning to the man on the stretcher he says, "You can get up now and go home." The man did, paralysis gone, his body working again.

As we glean some wisdom from this story, I would like to pose a few questions. First, what does it tell us about our human condition? Second, what does it tell us about God and His will for our lives? And third, what does it tell us about what we need to do about the disconnects of our lives?

Although there is nothing in the story that tells us why the man was paralyzed, the only clue we get is that being forgiven seems to be the right medicine. Certainly what I see in the story is the suggestion that there is in our world and in our personal relationships "things" that can cause us paralysis. Maybe not the kind that puts us in a wheelchair but the kind that numbs, numbs us to the needs of others, numbs us to our need for connection, numbs us to our own need for intimacy with others and with God. One of these numbing factors is certainly guilt. Guilt is the source of a lot of disconnect in our lives. It can paralyze a network of friends and family. It can separate you from people and can be a generally negative

factor. On the plus side, however, it is the feeling of guilt that announces that pane of glass in our heads has been shattered. It announces that happiness will be found somewhere else now and that is always a good thing. However, says Frederick Beuchner, “The danger of guilt, both personal and collective, is less that we won’t take it to heart than that we will take it to heart too much and let it fester there in ways that we, ourselves, often fail to recognize. The sense of our inner brokenness estranges us from the very people who can help us most.” In short, guilt has the power to paralyze our emotions, our spirits, and our social connections to other people. It also attacks our sense of responsibility and accountability for our part in any disconnect. What guilt can breed within us is a rush to deny. We can say to ourselves, “But, I didn’t do that and I shouldn’t feel guilty.” “I really didn’t do anything that bad.”

When Albert Speer, Lieutenant to Adolf Hitler, appeared before the War Crimes Tribunal in Nuremburg in the late 1940’s, he denied any knowledge of the Holocaust. His only crime, he said, was that he “looked away.” A BBC journalist at the time reacted this way, “You cannot look away from something you don’t know about. If you looked away, then you knew.”

All of us live with broken connections that we long to have fixed. Guilt is something that needs to be dealt with or it will wear away at our minds, our souls and seriously erode connections that make life worth living. As Philip Yancey writes, “We can be obsessed by a memory of some sin committed years ago. It never leaves you. It cripples your mind, your relationship and your prayer life. In the process, guilt puts up barriers against the enveloping grace of God.” What we see in this story about the paralyzed man is something about the human experience, of this emotional, spiritual and social paralysis that, if left unnamed and unchecked, can do us great damage.

This brings us to our second question. What does this story tell us about God and his activity in our lives? We need to say first that Jesus' forgiveness of the young man was intimately related to the healing of guilt. God's agent of forgiveness on Earth is Jesus Christ. It also tells us that his forgiveness is closer and more accessible than perhaps we've ever dreamed. That's what Jesus meant when he said, "The Son of Man had authority on Earth to forgive sins." Again, as Frederick Beuchner observed, "In order to break the cycle of guilt, we need somebody before whom we can put aside the disguise, trusting that when he sees us for what we really are, he won't turn his back and run away. Our trust in Him leads us to trust his trust in us and so in his presence the fact of our guilt no longer makes us feel or act out of our guiltiness and we can step on to the firm ground of his acceptance, where we'll be able to walk a straight line again." Probably all of us believe in God's forgiveness but do we believe that it is this close, this accessible? Do we really believe that the Lord is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness?" (Psalm 103)

A few years ago, I was going through a period of being disconnected myself and feeling a strong sense of personal guilt. It was a Thursday and in our city this was garbage day! I had already put the two dark green easy-tie bags full of refuse on the boulevard by the curb for the garbage collectors to pick up. I was in my study working on my sermon for the following Sunday in a room that overlooked the street. I looked up to see the garbage truck coming along. The man on the truck simply grabbed my two bags, flung them into the back and they were gone. As I watched the scene, I had this strange sense of freedom. The man never looked inside the bags. He just threw them in the truck and drove away. The thought came to me that maybe this is how God wants to deal with the garbage of our lives, that unwanted guilt, brokenness and failure. If only we could just put it out there and let him

take it away. He won't need to look inside; he already knows what's there! As Corrie Ten Boom once wrote, "He buries our guilt in the bottom of the sea and puts a sign up 'No Fishing'".

So finally, what does this story suggest that we might do? There are a few things that happened in the story that enabled the paralyzed man to get to Jesus and then to receive his healing. First, he had to accept a little help from his friends and admit that sometimes we can't do life on our own. Using Carol Shield's image, the pane of glass in our heads is now broken and we need help in cleaning up those sharp pieces of glass that can rip up the rest of our lives. Whatever the reason for the man's paralysis, he had four very loyal friends who wanted something better for him. It was through his connectedness with them that he got to Jesus. You may remember that old song from the 1970's, "People who need people are the luckiest people in the world." It's a great song and it's a truth that unfortunately is very dated. Robert Putnam believes depression rates among North Americans, in his book, *Bowling Alone*, to be linked to social isolation. Educational sociologists report that the average American teenager typically spends approximately three and one-half hours of waking time alone each day, more time alone than with family or friends. Compared with the same age group in the fifties or sixties, they have fewer, weaker and more fluid friendships. Martin Seligmann traces growing depression rates to rampant individualism coupled with events that weaken our connections to larger traditional institutions. Therefore, we need each other to meet our personal spiritual goals. We cannot live to ourselves for ourselves and enjoy the blessings of the good life. We need time when we invite others to come over, even pick them up and carry them along if need be.

Secondly, we as individuals need to be willing to go along for the ride. Connectedness is a two-way thing. The paralyzed man on the stretcher may have said, "We're going where? To hear whom?" He might have said this several

times but finally had given in! I was invited in my first term at university to a weekend sponsored by a Christian students' organization on the University of Saskatchewan campus. That group had a reputation. Many were Mennonites, Pentecostals and from the "born again" crowd. From my Anglican point of view, this was cause for suspicion. However, after being coaxed for a few days, I gave in and went. What impressed me most was the joy these people had – a joy their faith gave them, a joy that I frankly did not have, but longed for. That weekend was a major step in my journey of faith and I was grateful. All I had to do was "go along for the ride."

The third thing we may have to do, like the men in the story is do a "little digging." The forgiveness of God, that grace and gift that connects some of the disconnects of our lives sometimes takes a little work. If relationships are to be repaired and our guilt cancelled by God's forgiveness, there is an effort that we have to make.

A friend of mine told a story of going through a period of doubt, guilt and longing for God's forgiveness. He had come to a point where only God could grant that. He knew it. So, one night he decided he would sit in a chair in his little apartment alone and simply plead for God to forgive him. He would stay in the chair until he felt it happened. No one had suggested this to him. He just needed to do it even if it took all night. With Psalm 51 open on his lap, a psalm of penitence, which includes the words, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me – purge me from my sin, blot out my iniquity." he sat there in prayerful silence. After three hours he fell on his knees, tears in his eyes, forgiven. He'd heard in his heart those words, "Son, your sins are forgiven. You can get up and walk again."

In closing, we are reminded that, for most of us, that pane of glass in our heads we call happiness is probably broken! That part of being fully human is to acknowledge that guilt is not our friend. It can paralyze and cripple relationships and

cause serious disconnect in our lives. The best medicine for guilt is God's forgiveness and like the garbage man, he just wants us to put it out there, acknowledge it and He will take it away. In order for that good thing to happen, we need to go along for the ride, do a little digging and then listen for those wonderful liberating words, "Friend, your sins are forgiven. Get up and walk again.

Someone Who Touches You Where You Really Hurt

Some people brought a man who could neither hear nor speak and asked Jesus to lay a healing hand on him. He took the man off by himself, put his fingers in the man's ears and some spit on the man's tongue. Then Jesus looked up in prayer, groaned mightily, and commanded, "ephphatha – open up!" And it happened.

Mark 7

Dr. David Allen, in his book, *In Search of the Heart*, develops a theory that he calls "the hurt trail." Very simply, when any of our basic needs for affection, security and control are not met, usually in childhood, we respond by compensating with things that often are destructive to ourselves and others. In a conversation about this, he was delighted to find in me my own personal "hurt trail." He was also happy to explore its roots and offer some good advice! All of us, throughout the storms of our lives, are subject to being hurt in many ways. However, those people who are deprived of an experience of love, security and control, especially in childhood, find it much more difficult to shake off those hurts. For those of us who lack any support systems, networks, family or friends, life can become a very cold and unfriendly place to live. We hear medical people use the term, "shutdown", when referring to vital organs when a person is very ill. That can also happen to anyone who is deprived of love, affection, a

place to belong and some semblance of control over their own life. Life can be shut down, a marriage or friendship can be shut down and we become closed to the very things that could feed or nurture our lives.

In this chapter, we are looking at those restorative processes, those agencies of healing that we might access in order to interrupt the hurt trail and find redemptive openings for those living with closed lives, lives that have shut down. In order to explore this important and delicate subject, I want to use a story from the New Testament, a story about a life that is closed, shut down and unable to communicate with those around him. It says in Mark's text that, "Some people bring to Jesus a man who could neither hear nor speak." As we can guess, there were no hearing aids, speech therapists or any other aids in first century Israel. The social consequences for this man were very bleak. He could not hear what others were saying about the world, about God, about their feelings for him. As well, he could not make himself understood. Out of frustration we have a life that, in many ways, must have been closed. Just as in the case of the paralyzed man in the last chapter, this man was blessed with friends. The text says, "Some people brought a man". In spite of his disabilities and the hurt that flowed from that, he was blessed with people around him who recognized his problems and wanted to find for him a better life.

You and I live in a modern society where people who are disabled for any reason have a multitude of professionals available to help them. This man today would have had access to speech pathologists, audiologists and surgeons who might be able to help. Any advocacy group for the disabled or handicapped, however, will tell you that professionals alone are never the total answer. It takes an open, caring and involved community, support groups and government policies in order for such a person to find a more open life. Therefore, it's important to note this man was cared for by people who

were willing to “stick their neck out”, get involved in his life, and recognize his type of “hurt trail.” This is what good communities do for each other. It takes all of us to care, not just the professionals, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to visit the sick and to care for the little child. This group of people, whoever they were in Mark’s story, brings this man and all his problems to Jesus of Nazareth, who deals with the man in a most sensitive and creative way.

There are four things that Jesus does for this man that, in the end, open his life up to marvelous possibilities. First, Mark records that Jesus took him aside from the crowd. Second, he touched the man on his ears and on his tongue. Third, he looked up to heaven and fourth, he said, “ephphatha”, which translated means “be opened.” The value of these four steps not only demonstrates the sensitivity and redemptive mission of Jesus towards us but also suggests how we, professional or not, need to deal with one another if we want our communities, our families, and our churches to be places of healing and restoration.

I had a distant cousin who lived in our small village. He was a partner in a large general store and he was visibly very deaf. He wore a band over his head, an aid in his ear and a little box in his breast pocket. I remember my father saying that his cousin never went to church simply because he couldn’t hear anything. I’m sure he must have lived a very lonely and solitary life. Jesus, according to the gospel writers, had this sense of what the right method might be to help this man. He takes the man “aside from the crowd” knowing the need for some initial privacy. Jesus was saying to him, “You have my attention. You are important to me.” Jesus knew that the first step in caring for someone, connecting to someone, is to get the message across about that person’s value and worth, no matter who they are, their disability or where they come from. Many of us have had the experience of taking our pain and problems to someone who doesn’t listen. In a rush to

diagnose or give advice, we can miss out on the need to care. Some call this “attending”, even when the person in need can’t communicate very well which makes attending very hard work. A volunteer friend of mine was telling me of his time spent at the Veteran’s Unit near our local hospital, where one resident couldn’t or wouldn’t say very much. “It’s hard”, he said, “when you can’t dialogue. But, it seems to me to be the right thing. Just to be there and sit with him.” He was so right. Jesus is never prepared to write anyone off just because they can’t articulate or communicate. He draws them aside and attends to them. It’s what happens when we are profoundly loved.

The second thing Jesus does is touch the man’s ears and his tongue. In other words, he touches him where he is hurting most. He recognizes the pain. Any one of us, who has been through some crisis or struggle in our lives, probably knows that the most effective and helpful people are those who have simply recognized our pain and have taken time to listen to our story. In the book by Dr. David Kuhl, called, *What Dying People Want*, one of his chapters is devoted to the power of human touch. “Touch means to have contact with another person. It means there is a connection between people. Through both touching and being touched, the healing process begins.” People who are very sick can feel out of touch with so much that matters. The simple act of human touch can begin to restore social if not spiritual connection.

One of the paradoxes of our highly technical world is that because of computers and the Internet, we are potentially connected to one another in a way never before thought possible. You can now communicate by e-mail with your child or grandchild on the other side of the world and do it almost instantly. People are connected to one another in this phenomenal way. But, how far do these connections go in recognizing peoples’ pain and creating real community? As organizational therapist, Robert Eccles, says, “Face to face encounters

provide a depth and speed of feedback that is impossible in a computer-mediated communication. In spite of the many benefits of computers, building community, trust and goodwill is not easy in cyberspace.” There seems to be no substitute for in-touch, face-to-face, person-to-person communication, where someone you really trust can touch you where it really hurts and start a healing journey to begin. Henri Nouwen once wrote, “When we honestly ask ourselves which persons in our lives mean the most to us, we often find they are those who, instead of giving much advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a gentle and tender hand. It is the person who can be silent with us and face the reality of powerlessness, that is the friend who cares.” Jesus, in his deep desire to connect with this man, speaking a language that he would understand, reaches out, attends to him and touches him where he was in distress and the healing journey for him continues.

The third thing that Jesus does according to the text is he “looks up to heaven.” In that act, he was saying, “My friend, there is a God you know, we are not alone here. It is our connection with him that will take us further.” One of the deficits of the modern era is that we have disestablished mystery from its rightful place in daily and social living. In a rush to be rational, to have everything in our lives understood and within our own control, we have very little to surprise and enchant our lives. In our longing to be free of traditional and hierarchical authorities we have created this horizontal, flat reality where to look up for any unseen wisdom is a clear betrayal of our very nature. In the process, we and our culture have become detached and disconnected from that great spiritual mystery that has powered the very soul of Western civilization; that soul that powered the writings of Shakespeare, Donne, Lewis and the music of Mozart, Bach and Vaughan-Williams. For them, there was this mystery they called God, a reverence for the sacred. Pope Benedict XVI has written,

“When respect for the sacred in a society is lost, something essential is lost. While respecting the sacred in others, we must also respect the sacred within ourselves. Unless we can embrace our own heritage of the sacred, we will deny ourselves the true identity of Western civilization.” Arnold Toynbee said that, “the fate of any society always depends on its creative minorities.” Christian believers should see themselves as just such a “creative minority” helping our society to reclaim what is best in our heritage and therefore placing itself at the service of all humankind. Jesus, it said in the text, looked up. There was a God and that makes a huge difference in how we go forward in our pursuit to overcome the hurt trail in our lives.

The fourth step in the healing happens when Jesus says a very expressive Aramaic word and it is “ephphatha”, which translates “be opened.” It was an invitation to be complete, whole and very connected. It is a statement about what God wants for every one of us. Given that Jesus looks up and acknowledges the divine mystery that we cannot tame or control or fully understand, he leaves that man’s healing to God and asks for a miracle and the miracle happens. Within seconds the man can hear and speak plainly.

One of the observations we need to make of this story is that Jesus spoke in a language that the speech and hearing-impaired man could understand. In order to reconnect him to his world, Jesus uses words with gestures that could communicate clearly his will for his life. “He pulled him away from the crowd. He touched where he hurt most. He looked up to heaven and used that expressive word “ephphatha”. The most effective caregivers who I know are certainly those who show personal care, who acknowledge our pain and those who point us to God. They are also those who speak a language that connects with us. They scratch where we are truly itching. To be a community that cares for one another, supports one another in distress, that points

to the sacred in our heritage, we need to use a language that all can understand.

In closing, God is calling each of us to do what Jesus demonstrates in the story. He is calling us to learn the art of attending to one another, to recognize the pain in other peoples' lives, to touch that pain, to recover the sacred in our heritage, to invite our families, our friends, our communities to look up, to speak a language of care and concern and finally to open up to the miracle of true community, where we become profoundly connected in this very disconnected world.

Well-Connected, but to the Right People?

In the fifteenth year of the rule of Caesar Tiberius – it was while Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea; Herod, Ruler of Galilee; his brother, Phillip, Ruler of Iturea and Trachonitis; Lysanias, Ruler of Abilene; during the chief priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas – John, Zachariah’s son out in the desert at the time, received a message from God.

Luke 3

Many of us spend a lot of energy wanting to be “well-connected.” It’s fun to drop names of people we know, names of people in high places. If we add that we’ve had lunch with them or been to their home for dinner, even better! At least in our eyes, it seems to enhance our self-esteem, our value, to be well connected to the right people – those in power and with big responsibilities. Luke, the writer, must have known all this, when he penned this third chapter of his Gospel. He begins by listing the names of those who ruled Palestine at that time. It reads like a “Who’s Who” of the first century Palestinian Territories. These were the movers and shakers of the time, the men of power who could open doors for you. Everyone knew them. We could call them the original “G7” of the first century. They were of great influence in state and religion. At first reading, you might think that God would be impressed with such a list as this. If your plan is to enter human history and show people how they should live. If you

want to reshape the world to live in harmony, with justice for all; why not start here? After all, these are the people who mold and control public opinion. They have the army, the media, the economy and are the instruments of change.

However, God had other plans in mind and a better Group of Seven, a seven who were closer to his heart. It says in the text, “And the word of God came to John in the desert.” For some reason, God bypasses the big and the powerful and goes to a nobody preacher in the wilderness, puts his hand on him, giving him the message of “repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” If you look back in chapters one and two of Luke, there are six other names connected to John to “make ready the way of the Lord,” in order that Christ, the Messiah, might come. They are: John’s parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of Jesus, Mary and Joseph and two older people who hang out in the temple, Simeon and Anna. These seven, including John, are the seven nobodies that really changed the world. Yes, these are the people who God chose to be participants, partners in the process of redemption, his plan for a new and more humane world. Mary, Joseph and perhaps, John the Baptist, are the most well known of this Group of Seven and the youngest. The other four are also attractive to me, perhaps because of their age and experience. Luke describes Zechariah and Elizabeth as people who are “well stricken in years”. Simeon is depicted as a righteous and devout man, who God has told that he will not die before he sees the Messiah. Anna is described as “eighty-four years old and a widow”.

I hope that what we’re hearing in this text is dispelling any idea you might have that being a senior person, being old, means your usefulness to God and your community is over. As I read this list of seven, it is very clear that God had other things than age in mind, when he chose people to change the world.

The one factor that unites all seven of these characters in the first few chapters of Luke’s Gospel is that, although they

were very ordinary, they were people who were very open to God and who never stopped growing spiritually. Right from the youngest to the oldest, here were people with their hearts and minds in tune with God, hungry for food for their souls. Brennan Manning writes, “In essence, there is only one thing God asks of us, that we be men and women of prayer, people who live close to God, people for whom God is everything and for whom God is enough. That is the route of peace. We have that peace when the gracious God is all we seek. When we start seeking something else besides Him, we lose it.” Or as Thomas Merton said in his last public address before he died, “This is His call to us, simply to be people who are content to live close to Him and to renew the kind of life in which that closeness is felt and experienced.”

Something, as well, needs to be said about four of them, the senior citizens on the list. Again, why did God choose them? When I think of those lives that have impressed me most, that have inspired me in my Christian journey, many of them are older people. My experience has been that being “well-connected” to people like this has been the means to spiritual growth. Certainly, I have known some of them but it has also been enough to read what they’ve written and hear them speak. I’m referring to people like Nelson Mandela, Pope John XXIII, Billy Graham, Mother Theresa, Jimmy Carter and Madeline L’Engle. All of them refused to give up and kept writing, preaching, talking, giving and working for peace. I don’t presume to know exactly why God chose these seniors to be witnesses to His sending of the Messiah. Perhaps one of the reasons is that older people have a past, not only years piled up and a few anniversaries to remember, but memories of hurts that God has healed and mistakes that God has corrected and forgiven. For some of us, it takes a long time for God to find a space in our lives where he can do these wonderful things. We can fight him, dismiss him, run from him and say, “I don’t need you”. But for a lot of us, it’s taken

a long time, a lot of God's patience and grace to bring us where we are today. I remember speaking to a group of folks in Gander, Newfoundland. All of them, I guessed, were over fifty-five. At one point I asked how long they had been going to church and were in a closer relationship to God. Most of them admitted that their spiritual renewal had happened only in the last five years.

I've been reading a book by Anne Lamont, *Grace Eventually*. That title says it all. In the book she tells her story of, as a young person, "doing it all", drugs, sex, wild parties, being a single mom. Now, as a woman in her sixties, a committed Christian, she writes, "I wish grace and healing were more 'abracadabra', that some silver bell would ring to announce grace's arrival. But no, it's in the clog and slog, the pain and the tears, the hard decisions in the silence and the dark. That's where God's grace comes. If we were snatched out of that mess, we'd miss the lesson." A lot of us have had to find the grace of God that way, the hard way, and it's taken time and a few years.

A few decades ago, I went through a very painful divorce. For any of you who have had that experience, it's not something you remember favorably. It's not something any of us would recommend. Being a clergyman in a large downtown urban church made it impossible to go through something that serious privately. The day came when the bishop asked me to announce this sad news to the congregation. The Thursday evening before that announcement, I gathered the church leaders and the committee that had chosen me only two years before to tell them and to offer to resign. My main inclination at that time, frankly, was to run away. There were about twelve of them sitting on one side of the room. I sat alone on the other side. We began with prayer and then I shared the news, read the printed announcement that would appear in the bulletin the following Sunday and waited for their reaction.

There was silence for a while. Then, a woman in her mid-seventies stood up. She was an influential woman in the congregation, a proper lady and well respected. We had had an interesting relationship up to that point. We had affection for one another but certainly disagreed on many things, especially the red drapes in the vestry! She won that battle! This woman, however, on this Thursday evening stood up and lifted her chair. For a moment I thought she was going to throw it at me but instead she walked over to where I was, chair in hand, sat down, took my hand in hers and said, “I’ve been through this myself and I want to support the rector. He’s my friend.”

Now, that was a very gracious thing to do for a woman in her mid-seventies whose own story few in that room had heard before. It came as a grace to me, a grace perhaps, at some cost to her. I did not deserve it, but it was a grace that enabled me to continue my ministry in that place.

Certainly this is the story for Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist, two of the older people on God’s list of seven. Not long before the angel came to Zechariah, both of them had no doubt given up any real hope of having a child. Both of them must have wondered if they had any standing with God at all, since all their prayers remained unanswered. They still went to worship, synagogue and temple. Then, “eventually, the grace, the gift came.” You may remember the story of how Zechariah lost his voice for nine months. Perhaps, the thought of changing diapers at sixty can do that to a man! Anyway, it gave Elizabeth the chance to hold court, sing and dance around, request pickles and ice cream in the middle of the night, and Zechariah couldn’t say a word! When John, their son, was born, his voice returned and it was his time to say, “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, for he has come and redeemed his people.” It was “grace eventually.”

Both Simeon and Anna were “waiting for the consolation of Israel”, spending a lot of time in the temple. They had no

evidence of answered prayer. They just held on. Here again are people with history. At that age, they'd done a lot of living and both were ending their years not in disappointment or bitterness, not in lost hopes, not living out their last years in the "departure lounge" waiting for their final "flight" to be called, but waiting for God. In the end, as Luke, records it, each of them got to hold this child, who was born in Bethlehem with Mary, his mother. I'm sure, as the holy parents stood there in the temple that day wondering about these two old people making such a fuss over their baby, they had no idea that this was "grace eventually." It matters to whom we're well connected!

What all of this reveals, to our amazement, is that God uses aspects of our lives that we never dreamed he would ever want to use, our simple loyalty, our weakness, our vulnerability, our fatigue and things that we've done our best to hide from him. As the scripture says however, "the sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit, a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." (Psalm 51) That means that God uses things in us he regards as gifts that we would never put on our resumé. At the end of our time on Earth, if God granted honorary degrees and had St. Peter read the charge as to why we got that degree, we would be shocked as to what we did to deserve it. We might say under our breath, "But, what about that Ph.D. I worked so hard for? What about that book I wrote? What about that position I once held? What about those good connections with all those good people in power?"

The story of the Gospel is all about a God who picks up that chair and instead of throwing it at us, which we may deserve, comes over to where we live in our isolation and guilt and sits down beside us, takes our hand and tells us that we are profoundly loved. It doesn't get any better than that!

God chooses the foolish, the truly-but-strangely-connected to confound the wise; nobodies to confound the so-called some bodies; people on a wilderness track to confound the

dominant culture; and always people of prayer, people like Mary, who said, “I am the Lord’s servant, may it be to me as you have said.” Or people like Simeon, who said, “My eyes have seen your salvation.” People who had the courage to wait; people who found grace eventually. These are the well connected and it empowers our lives to be close to them.

Prayer - Connecting to a Better World

Then Jesus went with them to a garden called Gethsemane and there he prayed. "My father, if there is any way, get me out of this. But, please not what I want. You, what do you want?" He then went a second time. Again, he said, "My father, if there is no other way than this, drinking this cup to the dregs. I'm ready. Do it your way."

Matthew 26: 39

There is no question that you and I now live in a very spiritual world. For the last ten years, secularism has been challenged by a surge of religious growth. There has been a rise of Islam and Christianity in the developing world together with a resurgence of Russian Orthodoxy in Eastern Europe. Hinduism and Buddhism have experienced some revival, as well. Simply put, modernity is no longer characterized by the absence of God, but by the presence of many gods.

One of the commonalities of all these forms of religious community, whether Eastern or Western, is prayer. It is common to all spiritual and religious people. Prayer, whether it's collective or private, is something spiritual people do. All the great leaders of contemporary spiritualities are people of prayer. Benedict XVI is a man of prayer, as is the Dalai Lama. Devout Moslems pray five times a day. In most cases, this is the human effort to connect with the divine, whether as a thank you, a petition, or a simple wish to be noticed by a power greater than ourselves. We do it with others of like mind. We do it alone. We do it on our knees or standing. We

may light a candle, open a book, or sit in silence. Whatever our posture or method, we pray.

Prayer for many is a potent source of energy for their daily lives. Read any book on prayer and you will find powerful stories and testimonies about prayers being answered. Sick people will tell you that just knowing that people are praying for them can be a great comfort and strength.

For other people prayer becomes a problem. They wonder how it works and if it makes any difference. Maybe we prayed a lot about someone's health, or a lost child, and very little seemed to happen. Some people wonder how a prayer can ever get God's attention. After all, he is so busy and we are so insignificant. C.S. Lewis voiced this once, "Often, when I pray I wonder if I am not posting letters to a non-existent address." Letters and papers of Mother Theresa published recently reveal the anguish of a very saintly person, who had a serious problem with unanswered prayer. It's a valid question to ask. What difference does prayer make?

For some, prayer is mainly contemplative. It is a way of finding the presence of God. It is done on a daily basis, usually alone and in a quiet place. It is not prayer about winning a game, or passing an exam, or feeling better tomorrow. It's seeking the sacred presence, the comfort of love, and the compassion of the Divine. We call this contemplative prayer. It means finding the space, time and quiet for prayer, and being very intentional about it. It is for many a long term investment in a relationship with a Partner that you believe exists and cares for you. You may not know where he exists, nor are you sure that he's home every day, but there is this act of faith that presumes his reality and the benefit of his presence.

As well as that, there is another kind of prayer. We call it intercessory prayer, where we actually ask God to make changes in our situations, to bring health where there is sickness, to stop the cancer, to change the behaviour of a child, to lift a depression, to bring peace where there is war. We do that,

more often for other people who need change in their lives. But what, besides thinking well of other people, is going on in this prayer? As C.S. Lewis observed, "It can feel like posting letters to a non-existent address." It's true however, that most of us who pray, and pray often, do see answers to our prayers, or at least a change in a situation that we've been praying about. Voices inside our heads may whisper that "she would have gotten better anyway" but we hope that our prayer made a difference, however slight.

Some time ago, my wife and I were visiting a close friend in the hospital. She was gravely ill at the time because of a post-operative infection, which for a while threatened her life. After a short visit I asked her if we could pray for her. "Oh yes," she said, "please, please." The three of us joined hands and prayed. We were all in tears as we said the "Amen." By the next day there had been changes for the better in her condition. A short time later she was discharged.

Now, that may have been, of course, coincidence. Or maybe, just maybe, the letter got delivered and there was someone home! We wonder about that, don't we? As William Temple used to say, "Men challenge me that answers to prayers were just coincidence. Aw," he said, "the more often I pray, the more often coincidences happen." Prayer, you see, is a mystery. It is not a science. It is not all that predicable. There are no tests to explain its effectiveness. There's always this unknown space between my praying and God's response.

Perhaps it might be helpful to ask some questions. The first might be: Why then do so many people pray, given the mystery with no guarantee of results? Why do so many of us persist in prayer? I believe that we pray out of two realities, the first is something within ourselves and the second has to do with our faith, or shreds thereof, that whisper to us of this power, a loving power beyond ourselves.

It was Phillips Brooks, the rector of Trinity Church, Boston, who almost a hundred years ago said, "My prayers,

my God, flow from what I am not, thy answers make me what I am.” The first part of that suggests that we pray out of our helplessness, out of what we are not. All of us in the face of illness, or loss, pray out of helplessness.

Philip Yancey, in his new book on prayer argues that, “We pray because against such forces we have no powerful way to bring together the two worlds, the visible and the invisible. I present my world, whatever its circumstances, to God and ask for God's help in equipping me to counter the forces of evil.” Being on our knees is a highly symbolic posture. It expresses our human powerlessness.

One of the first things Jesus of Nazareth does with his disciples is to teach them how to pray. We still use that prayer, what we call “The Lord’s Prayer.” We could interpret the prayer as a statement about God. ‘God is our father, our first father. He knew us before anyone else did. He loved what he saw and his name needs to be used with respect. He has a kingdom of mercy and justice that he seeks to work out in peoples' lives. He has a will for peace and freedom for you and everyone else. He is a God who cares whether you're hungry or not. He knows that you need relationships that work. When those relationships get messed up, forgiveness is his best medicine. In our struggles with temptation and raw evil, he wants to stand with us and deliver us from both. Amen.’

Larry King once wrote a book called *Powerful Prayers*. It is a collection of prayers by everybody from Barbara Bush to Goldie Hawn. He quotes Willie Nelson, a favourite singer of mine. Willie writes, “I have a crisis every few minutes and prayer just seems like a safe place to go. I just keep saying the Lord’s Prayer over and over. I don’t get too inventive. That prayer has it all.” When Jesus taught this prayer, he said to his disciples, “Ask and you will receive; seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened.” It’s an invitation from Someone who lives in the presence of God, one who knows that prayer is worth the effort. That’s why people pray.

The second question about prayer is: How might it work? Do we have any idea what goes on between the feeble words out of our weakness and God's response? Karl Barth once wrote, "To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder in the world." When Jesus suggests to his disciples that they "ask, seek and knock", he is inviting all of us into a spiritual process that has something to do with God's kingdom coming, his will being done on earth as it is in heaven. Prayer, serious faithful prayer, prayer out of one's helplessness somehow disturbs the forces of disorder in the spiritual universe. Dr. E. Stanley Jones, in his writings on prayer, suggests that we live in an open universe where praying actually partners with the will of God to make that will come about. An open universe is the opposite of a closed universe, where fate, or some other determinism, makes no room available for our hopes and longings to ever have a chance. Ours is an open universe, where prayer disturbs and challenges the forces of evil that afflict our human lives.

Some of us can remember the end of the Cold War and the reunification of Germany in the late eighties and early nineties. Those surprising and amazing events were ignited by a series of prayer services in a Lutheran Church in Leipzig in Communist East Germany. Organized by a group of pastors on Sunday evenings, it grew to an every night event where people numbering in the hundreds would walk the streets with candles and prayers for liberty on their lips. Over the weeks the crowd grew to thousands. There was no violence just prayer, hymns and candles. They were walking in their weakness and their hope for liberation from the Marxist system. We know the results.

The third question we need to ask ourselves on prayer is why might I feel that my prayers are not heard? A journalist once asked Thomas Merton what he considered to be the leading spiritual disease of our time. Of all the things he might have said his answer was, "Efficiency. From the monastery to

the Pentagon, the plant has to run and there is little time or energy left over after that to do anything else.” It is not so much the badness of our lives but the busyness of our lives that keeps God at a distance. Frederick Beuchner once wrote, “What deadens us most to God’s presence, I think, is the inner dialogue that we are continuously engaged in with ourselves - the endless chatter of human thought.” The problem with all the busyness and efficiency is that it gives the illusion that we really don’t need God all that much. Although we say we want to pray, our lifestyle says otherwise. Although we say we need God, our lives leave little room for serious prayer. Like anything else in our lives that we value, we must make an effort. As with protecting our time around eating, sleeping and exercise, if we fail to protect our time around prayer, we become spiritually weak, sick, tired and empty.

If someone were to ask me how one might begin to pray, I would suggest that they start at home and find a fifteen minute block of time, preferably the same time every day, in a quiet, undisturbed place where noise is at a minimum. We need to start prayer on a very personal basis, making that time and space available, alone in the silence, giving God his chance to speak to us, to strengthen us, to direct us. As we persist in that, we can broaden our prayers to include others and God's will for their lives.

Finally, what do we have the right to pray for? People I know wonder if they have the right to pray for themselves, or the right to pray for the “biggies” like peace, or justice, or healing for a friend with cancer. Probably the most instructive scripture on this subject is the account of Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane the night before he died. For Jesus, there are two prayers and two requests. Facing what he feared most, suffering and death, separation from those he loved, his first prayer is, “Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.” If, in the providence and mercy of God it is possible that I escape the loss, the sorrow, the crisis to come, then may your will be done.

I find it reassuring that I have the right to pray for that. I can ask God against all the odds that what seems to be the inevitable may not happen. The world that God has made and that I inhabit is an open not closed universe. It's open to the possibility of change, miracle or renewal. This is never something to demand – just “If it is possible, let this cup pass from me.”

The second prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane is, “But, if that is not possible, if what seems inevitable happens, then your will be done.” This is the prayer of submission, of relinquishment, of letting one's fortune fall not into the arms of some blind fate or random chance but into the arms of a God, who knows us, loves us, whose greater good and greater will we can trust. Therefore, our prayers must include both these petitions: if it is possible and if it is not possible. But, in both cases, God's will be done. C.S. Lewis writes, “In Gethsemane, the holiest of all petitioners prayed three times that a certain cup pass from him. It did not. After that the idea that prayer is some sort of gimmick to get what you want is forever dismissed.”

So, does prayer make any difference? The first answer has to be: yes, prayer changes things. It certainly changes the one who prays. You cannot spend time each day open to God's presence and love and not be affected by that. The second answer lies in the mystery of an open universe. As Karl Barth wrote, “To pray is to initiate an uprising against the disorder of the world.” It's to enter a world beyond the 24/7 world, a space where the will of a compassionate, generous and merciful God is working itself out through history, a place where we are invited to ask and to seek and to knock, where we are given the right to pray: “if it be possible, let this cup pass from me but if it is not, then may your will be done.” That great plan of God's will, a will that may not settle our immediate need; but, as was the case with Jesus, a will that will bring resurrection and life, something beyond our wildest dreams.

Looking for a New “Best Friend”

But the fact is, it was our pains he carried – our disfigurements, all the things wrong with us. We thought he brought it on himself, that God was punishing him for his own failures. But, it was our sins that did that to him, that ripped and tore and crushed him – our sins! He took the punishment and that made us whole. Through his bruises we get healed.

Isaiah 53: 4-5

Anne Rice is the author of twenty books, many of them dealing with the dark and mysterious side of life. Such titles as: *Interview with a Vampire*, *The Queen of the Damned*, *Tale of the Body Thief* give her themes away. However, in 2005 she startled her fans by publishing a book called, *Christ, The Lord, Out of Egypt*. It is a tale of Jesus of Nazareth as a young boy. Although a novel, her research is grounded in traditional teaching and rooted in Jesus, his virgin birth and his growth into divinity awareness. The book became a *New York Times* bestseller and is regarded as a welcome contribution to the early life of Christ. Of even more interest is the author’s confession of her renewal of faith. She writes, “I returned to faith in Christ on December 6, 1998. It was after a long struggle of many years during which I went from a committed atheist grieving for a lost faith to realizing that I not only believed in Jesus Christ but that I felt overwhelming love for Him and wanted to be united with Him, both in my private and

public life.” Anne Rice had found her new best friend, Jesus of Nazareth.

Unlike the characters of Judaism and Islam, Jesus has been popularized in stage, screen and popular culture. The musical, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, or *Godspell*, or Mel Gibson’s, *The Passion of Christ* are all examples. Add to that a whole library of new books on Jesus and his significance, plus his picture on the front page of *Time* or *Newsweek* magazine, would cause one to think, at least in Western culture, that Jesus is a very popular figure. As well as the hype, there has been the quiet witness of people who continue to have their personal lives profoundly affected by this man. Ordinary people and scholars alike, disciples all, who for two thousand years have continued to believe that what he once said about God, about human life, about our suffering, about how we should live our lives and live with each other – is all true. Although that witness comes in different languages and from different communities, they are all united in the belief that Jesus Christ is the son of God, the fullest expression of God on earth and when one lives their lives in a personal relationship with Him, life is experienced in its fullest.

By far the most authentic sources of our knowledge of Jesus are to be found in the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, all written within decades of his death by men who either knew Him personally or were disciples of someone who did. All four writers are convinced that what they had witnessed and experienced was a unique and definable moment in human history. This man, Jesus, was no ordinary man, no ordinary teacher but in Him was a profoundly new experience of being human, a new humanity that had changed them and thousands like them. They needed not to just consume it for themselves but record it for others and for us. There are perhaps three essential messages that the gospels and the rest of the New Testament tell us about Jesus and his mission, why he came, how he saw Himself and what he

accomplished. They are: 1) he restores access to the One True God, 2) he rescues humanity from those dark forces that threaten to drown us in our own consumption and 3) he raises the bar on what it means to be human.

To begin with, we must remember that Jesus's story is at root a Jewish story. The God that the Jewish religious system talked about for at least two thousand years prior to Jesus's birth was the Creator of heaven and earth, who had called a new people through Abraham, delivered them from slavery through Moses and brought them out of exile in Babylon. During all of this time, he promised through the prophets and preachers the hope of a Messiah, a Deliverer, who would one day come and save the nation. Jesus is indigenous to this culture, its faith, hope and complexity. Although as history demonstrates, his significance was to become universal, and much larger than one culture could define; Jesus began his ministry as a Jewish preacher in a very small part of the world. His friends, family and disciples were all in one area.

One of Jesus' central missions was to restore access to God. For several centuries in Jewish religious practice the point of contact where God and his people met was the temple in Jerusalem. It was home to a sacrificial system operated by priests who spoke of forgiveness of sin and renewal of life through obedience to the laws of Moses and the offering of animal sacrifices. But, if you read the Old Testament prophets, they express a dis-ease with its effectiveness and integrity. In Jeremiah, chapter six, verse twenty, we read "Your burnt offerings are not acceptable, your sacrifices do not please me, says God." In Hosea we read, "I desire mercy not sacrifice, knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." Here was a system that was supposed to provide access to and relationship with God, but plainly, at least in the eyes of the prophet, was not working.

One of the most dramatic stories, included in all four gospels, is the occasion when Jesus confronts the temple sys-

tem and overturns the tables of the sellers of animals for sacrifice. He says some very forceful things. According to N. T. Wright, “In this action, he declares the temple and its system corrupt. But this was no clean-up operation but rather a sign that the temple itself was under divine judgement, that in fact it would be destroyed.”

Central to Jesus’ mission was the radical claim that he himself was the new temple. That access to God was no longer to be found in the temple, in Jerusalem, but in Him. In the trial of Jesus before the high priests the key accusation against Him was this promise of destroying the temple. According to John, “He said, ‘destroy this temple and in three days I will build it up.’” What the New Testament writers are saying is that access to God for anyone is no longer through a religious system, but is to be found in the person of Jesus Christ. Here is where God is to be met and experienced. Instead of being a ritual or practice or something you do in a holy place, now it is to be a relationship with a person. When you look at Jesus Christ, watch his behaviour – his concern and love for people, you are watching God Himself at work. Frederick Beuchner writes, “And so to be a Christian is simply to point at Jesus Christ and say, ‘I can’t prove a thing but there’s something about Him, his eyes, his voice, there’s something about the way he carries his head, his hands, the way he carries his cross, the way he carries me.’”

The second aspect of Jesus’ mission was about his capacity to rescue human life. Running through the Old Testament is this need for someone to come and rescue Israel from its enemies, if not from itself. Isaiah writes, “All we, like sheep, have gone astray.” Throughout Ezekiel God promises, “I will come to my people as a shepherd cares for his sheep and I will search for them and rescue them.” N.T. Wright observes, “At the time of Jesus there was a clear job description of this Holy Rescuer or Messiah. He would fight against Israel’s enemies, especially the Romans. He would rebuild the Temple, he

would bring Israel's long history to its climax re-establishing the monarchy of David and Solomon." But, Jesus does not see Himself in either of these nationalist or military roles. What he had come to rescue was not the prestige of a nation with the pride of a particular race and people, rather he had come to rescue humanity itself.

When you read Isaiah 53, a very different kind of Messiah or Rescuer emerges. This is the option that Jesus chooses. In verse three we read, "He was a man despised and rejected, a man of sorrows, familiar with suffering – by his wounds we are healed." Certainly this image of Messiah/Rescuer didn't sit well in Roman-occupied Israel. When Jesus tells his disciples that he would have to suffer and be rejected and be put to death, they didn't like it all that much. Peter said, "That will never happen to you, Lord." So much of Jesus' ministry was about rescuing people, poor people, sick people, guilty people, confused people and people who could not help themselves. Many of the stories he told were about lost people being found, about a man beaten up lying in a ditch being rescued and cared for by a total stranger. Even more compelling was, at the heart of the rescue mission, Jesus' concern over the problem of sin, guilt, and human aggression.

On the night before he dies, Jesus says to his disciples, "This is my body broken for you, this is my blood shed for you so that your sins may be forgiven." The next day, as he hangs dying on the cross, his first words are, "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing." Frederick Beuchner writes, "It is about as hard to absolve yourself of your own guilt as it is to sit in your own lap. In order to break the circuit of guilt, denial, depression and then anger, we need somebody before whom we can put aside our disguise, take off the mask, and in His presence truly be ourselves and hear Him say, 'Your sins are forgiven you.'"

I remember hearing about a church that, as a service to young families, provided childcare on a Saturday night so par-

ents could have an evening out. The pastor and his wife once took advantage of this service. Later, when the pastor went to pick up his four-year-old, the babysitter told him about a game that they were playing. She had asked each of the preschoolers what was mommy's favourite thing to do with them. "Do you know what your son said?" she asked. "He said, 'my mommy's favourite thing is to clean me up.'" "In truth," said the pastor the next morning in his Sunday sermon, "that isn't Susan's favourite thing to do with our son. Cleaning him up is just an excuse to hold him. Absorbing the mess is just part of the process of getting close and it's the same with God." On the cross of Good Friday, we witness God absorbing the mess of our lives, our guilt, our sins, our failures, our attempts to cover up who we really are, absorbing it in His blood and washing us clean so that he might get close to us. So, to define ourselves as a Christian as well as being one who is in relationship with Christ, we also are a rescued person, not by something we have done but by something we have allowed Christ to do for us, to forgive us, to wash us and to hold us to Himself.

Thirdly, central to Jesus' mission, was raising the bar on what it means to be human. As his resurrection on Easter morning raises Jesus to a new level of humanity, that same divine energy raises all humanity to a new potential for dignity and fulfillment. Reflecting on this fifteen years later (Colossians, Chapter three), St. Paul observes, "If you are risen with Christ, then seek those things that are above . . . compassion for others, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Forgive each other and put on love." If ever there was a list of virtues that we would covet for ourselves and children, here it is. It describes the behaviour of someone who any one of us would love to meet.

According to St. Paul, this potential is the legacy for all who are connected with this risen Jesus Christ. We find in the Gospel story a new way of being human. At root Jesus knew

that human beings are created in the image of God and loved by Him. Because of this they had value and worth beyond their imagination. He also knew that we live in a world in which we battle forces that seek to take that humanity away and reduce us to beasts.

The record shows that Jesus deals with every person he meets in such a way as to free him or her from these dehumanizing forces. In the parables He values that one lost sheep and brings it home. He values the victim of assault lying in a ditch and rescues him. He embraces lepers, gives dignity to women, forgives those buried in guilt and restores the insane to a new sanity. Jesus accepts people as they are but never leaves them there. He is somehow able to see past the false self that has defined us too often – what we do or how useful we are, or how attractive or productive we are. He is able to look past that to a truer self, that self which has the potential for a richer humanity, that true self created and loved by God. As Pope Benedict said some time ago, “Every one of us is the result of a thought of God. Everyone loved. Everyone needed. Everyone necessary.” This is a very crucial and relevant teaching for our time. A few years ago, Dr. David Goa, from the University of Alberta, in a *Globe and Mail* article observed, “Clearly in this twenty-first century secular world, we will be faced with an enormous set of judgements based on our best understanding of what it means to be human. “The Christian Church has been the center of culture and learning in Western society and we have an extraordinary amnesia about that. When we forget those dimensions, we become far less capable of thinking through the great issues that face us today. Secular society diminishes our capacity to think with depth and texture. It doesn’t tell us how to be human.”

In summary, the person of Jesus Christ, our potential new best friend, achieves the following: 1) He is the one who restores access to God, He becomes that Holy Place where we find God. 2) He is the Rescuer or Messiah – not through

aggressive military action but by suffering and service. 3) He raises the bar on what it means to be human. As Anne Rice said, “I became a Christian and returned to Church because of an intense attraction to Jesus Christ. I felt this overwhelming love for Him and wanted to be united with Him both privately and publicly.”

The Lazarus Factor

“There once was a rich man, expensively dressed in the latest fashions wasting his days in conspicuous consumption. A poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, had been dumped on his doorstep. All he lived for was to get a meal from scraps off the rich man’s table. His best friends were the dogs who came and licked his sores.”

Luke 16: 19-21

This chapter is about those distances both socially and spiritually that separate people from each other and from God, distances that destroy communities, families and indeed destroy the soul within.

I saw a cartoon several years ago, which had four panels. The first had a man and woman sitting across from each other at the breakfast table. She was staring out the window; he was hidden behind the morning newspaper. In the second panel the scene was the same but the woman asks, “What do you think about life after death?” He makes no answer. The third panel is the same scene, but silent. The fourth and final panel has the same scene but a voice from behind the newspaper responds to the earlier question, “What do you think this is??!”

The New Testament parable of the rich man and Lazarus is one of the many stories recorded in the Gospels that bring little comfort to soothe the soul. Instead, it is a shaper of the soul. Seldom would you hear this story read at a funeral or a memorial service. Where you might hear it would be at an

event, which promotes social justice issues, perhaps the building of housing for abused women or orphaned children. It is a story not meant to soothe a guilty conscience but to shape it. That is why we need to hear it again and again. I call it the Lazarus factor. Parables, as Jesus told them, were meant to be spiritual mirrors where we might see ourselves in any of the characters but also see God and hear his truth for our lives.

The story begins with identifying two men living very far apart in terms of lifestyle but very close geographically. One was a well-dressed rich man who ate lavishly every day. At his back door sat a poor man named Lazarus, who lived from the scraps thrown out from the rich man's table. The only friends Lazarus had were dogs that licked the sores on his skin. Both men died within a week or so of each other and the rich man finds himself in hell. Lazarus on the other hand finds his new location to be heaven or in the terms of the text "sitting in the lap of Abraham." In eternity the rich man can see Lazarus with Abraham and cries out asking Abraham to send Lazarus to comfort him. Abraham advises the former rich man that he is no longer in charge; in eternity things are different. Here, fortunes are reversed. Lazarus now has it all and he has nothing. "Besides," says Abraham, "between us and you there is a great gulf fixed. It was there in life between you and Lazarus. You made it and now it's permanent." "Well," said the rich man, "send Lazarus to speak to my five brothers. They're going to inherit all my wealth as well as the problems that go with it. Tell them what is to come." Abraham responds that "They have Moses and the prophets; they have their Bibles and if they don't read the warnings, even if Lazarus appeared from the dead, it would be no good."

This is not the easiest story to hear. You probably won't find it in *Chicken Soup for the Soul* or *Fortune Magazine*. It is interesting, isn't it, how we might remember this story from our Sunday School days? The interpretation was simpler then. There is something in all of us that takes some delight in see-

ing a rich man fall and a poor man finally coming into his own. It appears to be a story of the great settling of accounts, like some of the fairy stories our mothers read to us as children. Simple justice is done. Just as we read the stories of those executives in large corporations, who have suddenly had their fortunes reversed, we can see the rich man and Lazarus getting the justice they deserve.

However, Jesus doesn't tell this story to delight the child in us, but to challenge the adult. Let's look a little deeper into the lives of the two main players. The rich man is described as a certain man who dressed in fine linen and ate sumptuously every day. It's a lifestyle that we might easily envy. These words, themselves, do not indicate that there is anything wrong in this man's life. It is not bad and Godless to be rich nor is it a sign of goodness or piety to be poor. However, it is a terrible thing if the only ultimate statement that can be said about a person is that "They are rich."

If I have to write an obituary for a deceased relative or friend, I try to express in a single sentence or two which is most characteristic of them. For example, we might write: he was a good father; he was a good and loyal friend; or a Christian gentleman/Christian lady. Imagine in this case, all that could be said about a person was that he was rich, ate well every day and had twenty-five suits in his closet. Nothing else seemed to stand out in this man's life. This was his total identity, but there are other forms of rich. There are the riches of physical beauty, intelligence or talent. The obituary might well have read, "she was a beautiful woman", "he was a talented writer", "she had an outstanding mind", or "he was the best doctor in town." These are gifts highly valued in our culture that take you a long way towards success, gifts that are, frankly, the luck of the draw. If that's all that can be said, if no one else is invited to the party, if the riches of good looks, talent and intelligence are simply consumed and used to make themselves sufficient, what happens is that a kind of isolation

sets in, a protective solitude from the suffering of others. It can be a very lonely life. These are the stories of many celebrities, whether in the corporate, arts or sports world, with superior talent who become isolated and who are only known for their riches. They find themselves in the hell of loneliness perhaps addiction and depression.

The other main character in the story is described as a poor man and he is given the name Lazarus, which translated means “God is my helper.” He is placed at the other end of the social scale. He is dependent for life on the leftovers from the rich man’s table. This is an example of “trickle down” economics that didn’t work. As we said before, there is nothing inherently good about being poor. When the Bible speaks of poverty there is always more than the lack of money involved. It often involves people like publicans and sinners, people with few outstanding gifts, few accomplishments, or people on the fringes of life. These are the emotionally, economically, and socially insecure, people who live with losses.

This poor man has the name Lazarus and that suggests that his poverty has driven him to another level of dependence. Poor people are by nature dependent people, dependent on food banks, social agencies, and the generosity of others. That can be, for many, a source of deep bitterness, especially when on television all they can see are the beautiful, the talented, the well-connected, the rich in their fine linen and eating sumptuously every day. The story suggests yet another dependence, the name Lazarus translated from the Greek, “God is my helper.”

All of us have our times of poverty, of loss of relationship, of emotional instability, the loss of a friend or a spouse, or serious illness. In that poverty we reach out for something or someone to depend upon. We have a lot of choices. The easy answers include alcohol, drugs, gambling, or one-night stands. For other people, such poverty leads them to a

dependence on God. Many of us, perhaps, can testify to that truth. At a moment of deprivation, when our natural giftedness fails us, when even the pills and the pleasures don't work any more, we cry out for help and Someone hears us. Just like the father in the story of the Prodigal Son he comes running and in his compassion embraces us, accepts us, forgives us and says, "Quick, bring the best." In that moment we become Lazarus, "God is my helper."

The scene in the story now changes. We are now on the other side. It is Helmut Theilecke in his book, *The Waiting Father*, who suggests that the real meaning of this story is to be found in the conversation between Abraham and the rich man and the latter's concern for his five brothers. Having exhausted any hope for himself, the rich man pleads that Lazarus might take a trip and visit the brothers to warn them of the fate to come. Abraham responds that "First, there is a great gulf fixed between us and you." In other words, "For all these years you had Lazarus just a few feet away. It was a distance that you maintained in order to protect yourself from suffering humanity. Now that distance you so carefully maintained has become eternal, not only from Lazarus but from God." Abraham adds, "Your five brothers have Moses and the prophets. Let them read their Bibles because if they don't, not even a spectre from the dead would impress them."

Theilecke suggests that we are the five brothers. We are the inheritors of many riches and the danger of these riches is that they can create for us this distance, this pathological solitude that can separate us from our eternal destiny. Therefore, we need to read Moses and the prophets to find out the direction that needs to be taken.

In this Lazarus Factor story, we get hints and advice about what gives our lives true worth and value. According to Jesus of Nazareth and indeed all the scriptures, there is suggested a clear connection between living a full healthy life that is

pleasing to God and pleasing to ourselves and how we deal with human suffering. The folly of the rich man was that he thought being rich had to be achieved by creating a safe distance from Lazarus, that lonely, sick poor man just beyond his back porch. According to this story, it is our embrace of suffering, rather than distancing ourselves from it, where a deeper and richer grace is to be found. In Matthew 25, “It is those who saw me hungry and fed me, saw me thirsty and gave me something to drink, saw me naked and clothed me that find the true blessing of God.”

Finally, we need to address another solitude, not solitude between us and someone out there, but a solitude that exists in our inability or unwillingness to deal with the suffering person within. In a previous chapter I mentioned Dr. David Allen, a psychiatrist in the Bahamas, who talks about a “hurt trail” that ambles through many of our lives, a hurt trail rooted in the hurts of early life and hurts that need to be dealt with. We live in a culture addicted to suppressing pain, pain that needs to be named and addressed. Solitudes that are denied or suppressed create behaviours and lifestyles that devalue and disturb our lives. St. Paul’s Greek word for suffering is “pasco”, which in English means pascal or passion. Pascal pain is that pain which becomes redemptive, like the suffering on the cross on a Friday, not denied, not medicated but embraced and conquered.

I remember some decades ago, going through a difficult time in my own personal life. A friend said, “Bill, you need to lean into your pain, not run from it or deny it. The more and the harder you lean, you will break through it and there will be sunshine on other side.” Nicholas Walterstorff once wrote, “When I look at the world through my tears, I see things that dry-eyed I could never see otherwise.” Whether it’s our own suffering or the suffering of others, to avoid, deny or build firewalls to protect us from it, creates a solitude. This solitude may salve but will never save the soul. As we wel-

come and touch the pain and loss of others and indeed the pain and loss within ourselves, inasmuch as we can do that, we find to our utter joy and surprise that we welcome and touch God himself. We can see the world through our tears, things that dry-eyed no one could ever see. This is the Lazarus factor.

Connecting When You're Tired and Fed Up

When Jesus finished teaching, he said to Simon Peter, "Push out into deep water and let your nets down for a catch of fish." Simon said, "Master, we've been fishing hard all night and haven't caught even a minnow. But, if you say so, I'll let down the nets." It was no longer said than done. A huge haul of fish straining the nets past capacity. They waved to their partners in the other boats to come and help them. They filled both boats nearly swamping them with the catch.

Luke 5

The theme of this chapter is the very human experience of running out of energy, hitting the wall, doing our best at something but that best is never enough. It's about 'working hard all night and catching nothing.' It is finding ourselves in situations where we've tried to do the right thing, followed the rules, but still came up empty. We feel exhausted and those strange voices inside our heads are loud with putdowns, and a sense of helplessness sets in. We, like Peter, have 'worked hard all night and haven't come up with so much as a minnow!'

When I was doing parish ministry a few years ago, a young man came into the reception area of our church and asked to speak to a minister. He was an accountant in his mid-thirties. He worked in a good firm, made a good salary and

was close to becoming a partner. He was, also, engaged to be married and had put in an offer on a home in a nice area of the city. He had a lot going for him and I was very impressed. “But,” he said to me in tears, “there’s something tearing my life apart.” He confessed that he and his friends at university had decided that religion and God were for losers, and that science and technology could answer all of life’s problems. He hadn’t been to church in decades he said, but “three months ago my brother was killed in a car accident and I’m not coping very well. I’ve tried a lot of things.” he said, “I’ve tried counseling, meditation and running in the morning. I’m drinking too much and my relationship with my fiancé is on hold. I’ve hit the wall and I don’t know what to do.” Then he looked up at me through his tears and asked, “Could I have been wrong about God?” You see, he had worked hard, done what he thought might help him in his pain and grief, and came up empty – “Could I have been wrong about God?”

The story from Luke is about Peter and a few of his friends. Peter was to become not only a disciple of Jesus but the first leader of the Christian Church after Pentecost. Although bound for greatness, it is hard to foresee all of that in this story. According to the text, Jesus was in the early months of his ministry and was in the process of choosing his first disciples. On this day he was preaching by the Sea of Galilee. The crowds were so large that he asked a fisherman if he could use his boat from which to speak two or three feet out from shore. It happened to be Peter’s boat and he agreed.

About noon, when the congregation went home for lunch, Jesus said to Peter, “Why not take your boat into the deep water and do some fishing?” Peter responds, “Master, we have tried hard all night and didn’t catch even a minnow.” In the old King James Version it says, “We have ‘toiled’ hard all night and caught nothing.” That sounds a little more desperate somehow. Whatever the version, can you hear the exhaustion in Peter’s voice? Nighttime was the right time to fish.

The fish, if they were there, were near the surface. During the day they headed for the bottom and the nets wouldn't go that deep. When Jesus suggested he go fishing, he wondered what this non-fisherman was talking about. Peter responds, "Look, we've done everything we could at the right time with the right equipment and we're exhausted." He then, perhaps reluctantly adds, "But, because you say so, I'll try again."

All of us know the story. When Peter got out into the deep water, things started to happen. He caught so many fish the nets couldn't handle them and he needed help from his partners to bring the fish to shore. When he returned, Peter approached Jesus and said, "Forgive me, Lord, for not trusting you. I'm a sinful man. I don't know why you bother with me." Jesus quickly responded, "Peter, don't worry about that. From now on you will be catching people instead of perch!"

The first thing we need to hear from this text is that, in a very real way, we were never intended to live life alone, to do business alone, to do church alone, on our own energy and our own strength. It is simply not the way we're meant to live. The Bible teaches us that we are hard-wired for relationships. Being a lone ranger in any area of our lives is not what God intends. Living a solitary life, needing no one and being so stubbornly independent about that, can lead to exhaustion; and that exhaustion can lead to depression, disappointment and bitterness. As P.T. Forsyth once said, "Unless there is something inside us that is from above us, we succumb to what is around us." Unless we are connected to someone greater than ourselves, we unfortunately find ourselves vulnerable to all the negative forces of fear and doubt that surround us.

I remember having lunch with a Christian worker several years ago on a university campus. I was telling her of my plan to have a Sunday evening service at our church for university students. The church was situated within walking distance of two campuses. My problem was that I needed a preacher. As I explained to her, I had preached three times on Sunday

already and I was usually very tired and I just couldn't do a fourth. I remember the look on her face as she studied me across the lunch table and remarked, "Bill, you can do it. There is a God, you know." Sometimes we can think that our own best efforts are all we have. If we can't do it on our own, it just won't happen and perhaps shouldn't happen. The good news of this text is that we're not alone in this distressing "every one out for themselves" kind of world. There is a God, you know. He is a God who longs to stand beside us and give us his strength, his power and especially his courage.

The second message of the text is that Peter's success at fishing that day was the result of his willingness to enter into a new personal partnership with Jesus Christ. After all, standing on the shore disappointed, exhausted and feeling sorry for himself, didn't catch many fish! What this story is telling us is that we have Somebody available to us, this man from Nazareth, who is inviting us to follow him and partner with him. Change in our lives, even miracles, do not happen by standing on that beach alone feeling sorry for ourselves. It happens when we, tired and exhausted as we may be, take the hand of this man from Nazareth that is always reaching out to us and partner with him in all aspects of our daily lives.

Part of the partnering with Christ is taking him at his word. It says in the text, "Peter said, 'Because you say so I'll try again.'" Those who know their Bibles know that it is a book that contains many promises: "I will never leave you or forsake you; when two or three are gathered I will be there with you; I go to prepare a place for you." These are promises, absolutely, but in order for us to realize these promises, we need to take Jesus and his promise at face value. Peter did: "Because you say so, I'll try again."

Frederick Beuchner, a retired preacher and writer in New Hampshire, tells the story of going through a crisis with his teenaged daughter. She was depressed and not eating. The family was in turmoil. One day he was sitting alone along a

highway in his car thinking about all this and praying for guidance on how to handle it all. He was exhausted and running out of energy. Suddenly, a car went by slowly enough that he could read the license plate. On the plate there was one word. He writes, “Of all the words in the dictionary that I needed to see and hear that day, this was the word. The word was TRUST. It turned me around,” he said. “Of course I knew Whom I had to trust but I needed that push and it came. I wrote a story about that incident for the local church page in my New Hampshire community and a few days later a man knocked at my door with a gift – his license plate. It seemed that he was a trust officer in a bank.” However the word came to him, Frederick Beuchner saw it as a word from God about the rest of his life. Some days in the crises of our lives all we can do is trust, take Jesus at his word, partner with him, take his hand and be his disciple. If any of us feel separated from God, that God may have lost interest in us, maybe it’s about trusting him again, letting him carry us. Something, at least as I read in my Bible, he longs to do.

As well as this vital partnership with Christ, the text speaks of another level of partnership. The text reads, “Peter called out to his partners in the other boats and they came to help him.” The miracle of the catch of fish was a product of the vertical level of partnership. Getting the catch to shore was accomplished by having another set of partners; his friends, a horizontal level of partnership.

This is a very important issue in our time, when personal contact and face-to-face meetings seem to be in decline. The point made in the text is that there is no substitute for community when the job needs to be done. This is as certain for the life of the Christian as it is for those in the marketplace. People who need people are still the luckiest people in the world.

Recently, in the Careers section of *The Globe and Mail* (August 15, 2008) John Izzo writes about the disconnecting

effect of modern technology. He tells of flying business class on Air Canada between Vancouver and Toronto. “The seating was like a work station with a t.v. and an outlet for personal electronics and arranged in a way that you could hardly see any other passengers. As I was looking around no one was talking to any one. It’s a perfect image of the new world of work. We are so near and yet so far. Sadly lost in this virtual world is an appreciation for the art of the personal touch, of getting out and actually talking to someone, of sending a handwritten note, of networking with people within and outside the company, of recognizing that the best professionals still know the value of human connection.” So it is with the church! “You in your small corner and I in mine,” certainly doesn’t work in the twenty-first century if it ever did. People in the church must work together as partners in order to, figuratively speaking, bring in the fish.

Finally, a word about what Peter did, along with his friends, to follow through on his willingness to trust Jesus Christ and to take him at his word. What Jesus tells Peter to do is to go out into the deep water. For Peter it was the place he frankly didn’t want to go – “Been there, done that” he may have said. But, for some reason, he was able to overcome his fatigue, cynicism and doubts, and go anyway.

All of us have our deepwater places, places we don’t want to go. Like Peter, these are places where we’ve not succeeded, maybe have tried hard but given up. These may be difficult relationships with family members or friends, where we’ve tried to get close, tried to make up, tried to connect, but we’ve come up empty. These relationships might be with people at church, where, in spite of great effort, nothing good seems to happen. Jesus is saying, “You need to go back there where you lose control and let God do what he wants to do.”

All of these deepwater places are risky places, places where God is in control and not us. Yet, here is the place where the miracle happens. It is the place of hope and trans-

formation, the place of healing and deep love. It is the place where we let go and let God connect with us.

In summary, God is saying we don't have to live alone anymore. We don't have to do life on our own energy alone. There is a God! Secondly, Jesus makes us an offer – “follow me, partner with me, trust me.” As well, he encourages us to partner with other people to get the job done. Without community we will fail in our Christian and personal endeavors. Thirdly, we need to go out to those deepwater places, places where we may be uncomfortable, take a few steps of faith and take the risk. The possibilities are amazing.