

CONNECTIONS THAT TRANSFORM US

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John 15:5-17

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Twenty years ago, I was sent to a failed new church start to see whether it could be turned around or should just close its doors. I'd never seen such a messy group of people. They had all the money in the world, but all they did was fight about it. They'd created great youth and family programs, but had forgotten how to work together as a church family. They had amazing worship, setting up and breaking down a beautiful worship space every week in the elementary gym they rented. But the Spirit wasn't moving. In spite of all their perfect programs and creative worship, what they truly excelled at was fighting over everything – so good at it that they were successfully destroying their new church start. This new church that had grown to 300 members was now down to 100 members. So, in I went with my team of experts. Our mediator offered conflict resolution. Our strategist led visioning sessions. I preached inspiring sermons, and our worship team created amazing spiritual gatherings. It ought to be working. I knew this church could grow again. But still there was this underlying tension. Every decision was a fight. Every conversation carried tension. They were afraid to talk honestly, afraid to listen deeply, afraid they were never going to build, afraid they

might have to close their doors completely.

Until one Sunday morning when our Lay Leader Jerry stood up at church and said he needed prayer for a kidney. Both of his were shutting down, and it was only a matter of months until his death. We laid hands on Jerry, we prayed over Jerry, we cried, we sang, we worshipped. The next night at Church Council, something was different. Jerry wasn't there, and yet he was. We talked more honestly, we listened more compassionately, we knew their church had to continue because Jerry needed us. Then the next week in worship, Jerry's wife got up and announced that a donor had been found. The week after that, both Jerry and Steve were absent from worship, and we realized who the donor was. Everything changed for that church that month. If Steve could give his very kidney for Jerry, a man he barely knew, the rest of them could surely forgive old hurts and start loving each other. And they did. I watched this group of people become the loving people they were meant to become and finally start putting hands and feet to all the training and work we'd been doing together. But it all began with that gift of sacrificial love that Steve offered to Jerry.

Their church started growing again – not because of my great strategies and their great programs, but because of their great love. Through Steve's life-giving

gift to Jerry, that church and I learned a lesson that I've never forgotten: all the "right" actions, tools, and rules can't make anything work unless those "right" actions are undergirded by the only action, the only tool and the only rule that matters: Love. Love is the foundation that connects us to God and connects us to each other with God's powerful Spirit. When Steve laid down on that operating table to give Jerry a kidney, we knew he was possibly laying down his very life for a friend. And since that time, this scripture has inspired me in a way I might never have understood if I had not been witness to this amazing moment in two people's lives and the way it impacted the lives of an entire church.

When these words in the Gospel of John were written down, Jesus had been dead and gone for many years. But his followers remembered well the gift of life he had given not only through his death on the cross, but through the life of love he lived for each of them, teaching and preaching and healing and helping lovingly and generously throughout the months and years Jesus walked alongside them as their master and guide. These early Christians in John's community, many of whom had never known Jesus in the flesh, knew that Jesus' gift of life-giving love was a lesson for every Christian to learn – then and now. Jesus' gift of life-giving love is not an old fashioned lesson to be ignored; it is an example for all of us.

Jesus calls us into loving connection with him. “You are my friends.” Jesus calls us to live out that friendship by caring lovingly for one another. “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.... This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

This is not an easy command; this is not a quick “love you” comment dismissed as easily as it is spoken. This is a love that took Jesus all the way to the cross. This is a love that took Steve to that operating table for Jerry. This is a love that can take all of us to places of selflessness, generosity, and even sacrifice. This is a love that defies logic.

This type of love is what sets us apart as followers of Jesus: love that gives so generously, so selflessly, so sacrificially that we might even find ourselves laying down our very lives for another. This love is what transforms our lives and helps us to transform the lives of others. This love is so powerful that it can create new life, even life out of death. It was this type of love that led Steve to give one of his kidneys to save Jerry’s life, not because they were best friends – they weren’t. Not because they were relatives – they weren’t. Not because he owed Jerry any favors –he didn’t. Not because anyone at church was calling for donors to offer themselves – we weren’t. But because the Spirit nudged Steve to share his life with

Jerry in that profound gift of sacrifice and self-giving love.

We are all called to live this kind of love both in our own Christian communities and in the world's communities, of which we are a part, each of us called to live this love in our own unique way. It's not likely one of us is going to be called to give a kidney for another one here, but if that's where the Spirit calls one of us to go, I hope we'll go there. It's not likely that one of us is going to be martyred for our faith, as many in John's community were some 2000 years ago. But we will be called to love people we don't expect, in places we didn't anticipate, or ways we don't necessarily feel prepared for. Love will call us – love does call us -- to connect to each other, to connect to Christ, and to connect to God's world. Love is calling us, each and every day, calling us to shape our lives around love, to create connections through the power of love.

Last fall, I was leading a Bible study on this passage of scripture, using a story from my latest book *The Gospel According to Beauty and the Beast*. If you know the film, you know that as Beast lies dying in the end, only the power of Belle's love can save him. Ultimately, the fairy tale ending can only happen if they each are willing to give their lives for the other. I asked people in this Bible study to reflect on any time when they had given love in a sacrificial or self-giving way

that really exemplified laying down one's life for another. At first, everyone in the Bible study objected, "Oh no, I've never loved that way." "Oh, no, I've never given that generously before." "Oh, I wish I were that good of a Christian, but I'm just not there." The circle of conversation grew silent, as we all reflected on this challenging question: "Have I ever given myself for another?"

But then one of the women broke the silence. "Actually," she said to another woman there, "you've given that way to me. Remember when I went through my horrible divorce and you took me in, even though there was no room in your tiny house and not an extra penny in your bank account. You welcomed me with wide open arms, never asked for a penny of rent, and fed me dinner every night – not to mention held my hand and offered tissues as I cried myself to sleep."

Suddenly, the conversation started flowing like a flood gate had been opened. Each one knew of a time when someone else in that room had given sacrificially. And as we heard the stories, we all began to see ourselves in a new light. We began to realize that we were in the presence of saints, in the presence of friends who truly loved in this self-giving way that Jesus teaches. And much of that self-giving love had been flowing through that circle of connection for over a decade of friendship together. They had experienced self-giving love from each

other, they had seen one another give it to others in their church, their families, and their community; and now they were able to name it and recognize the powerful transformation they had experienced in each of those instances of giving or receiving such powerful self-giving love.

We don't have to be martyred to give in this way. Jesus' death on the cross is intended to prevent that very thing, so that we don't feel some sense of guilt driving us to follow rules that destroy our self-worth. Jesus doesn't want us to love or give in a way that makes us doormats who are trod upon. Jesus came that we might have life and have it abundantly, so that we can love out of that abundance. God wants us healthy and whole, strongly connected branches to Christ our Vine, so that we can bear the fruit of giving love freely and joyously and abundantly.

Bearing the fruit of love is our calling, and sometimes that call will challenge us to a love that is self-sacrificing. When that moment comes, our self-giving love will connect us with God and one another in a way that nothing else can ever do. By loving in this way, we become partners with Christ, mutually loving God's people and God's world. By loving in this way, we are freeing the Spirit to flow through us so abundantly that our love can burst forth to bring gifts of nourishment and care for others who need us. By loving in this way, we are

inviting divine love to intermingle with our love so that we are transformed into the beautiful images of God we are created to be in the first place. And when our love intermingles with divine love, magic happens. I mean, crazy-miracle things happen. A man donates a kidney to someone he barely knows. A runaway finds a safe haven in the home of an estranged grandparent. Enemies become friends. Hungry children are fed. And the world looks a little more like the kingdom of God.

With this divine love flowing through us, we are interconnected with God, like fruit-filled branches of grapes connected to a vine so strong, so old, so nurturing that it can grow grapes through every branch that connects through the power of love. That's how God works, sending beautiful fruit into the world through each and every one of us when we allow that love to fill us and flow through us, to create life-giving beauty to nurture God's world. That's what happens when the love flowing through us begins to produce peace, joy, patience, grace, kindness, forgiveness, and compassion in and through us. We become fruity, for these are the fruit of the Spirit flowing through us, the products of love flowing through each of us as we connect ourselves to the Vine of Life, who is Love itself. As followers of Christ, we are called to this self-giving love, not because we have

to, not because anyone forces us to, but because we feel called to do so and because the Holy Spirit living in us makes it possible for us to do so.

When Steve sensed that call, he didn't hesitate – just went to the hospital to see if he was a match and discovered he was – no surprise why the Spirit nudged him, I guess. Three years later, I stood with Steve and Jerry as Jerry and their new pastor pushed their shovels into a pile of dirt that would soon house the cornerstone and foundation of the church they were building. Jerry, who had once been too sick to stand and sing a hymn, was now digging in the dirt and building a new church with his brother Steve and their entire family in Christ. Tears flowed as we clapped and laughed together, smiling through our tears as we thanked God for their church that was thriving and growing and making their community a better place each and every day. As the ceremony ended, Steve and Jerry hugged and a cheer went up from the crowd. In front of our very eyes, we were seeing the fruit of their love – a new church building, a loving church family, and two men healthy enough to share in that joyous day.

Will you pray with me.

Loving God, Vine of Life, help us to love one another as you have loved us. Help us to live as the beloved community you call us to be. Flow through us with your mighty Spirit, so that your loving Spirit guides every word, every thought, every action. Love through us, so that in us others may discover the beauty and power of your love right here and right now. Amen.

Postscript:

Jerry lived another 12 years, long enough to see his grandchildren graduate high school and his wife prepare for life without him. The church they helped to found and build continues to thrive and grow some 25 years after these two men first met as casual acquaintances at a charter member meeting to discuss the possibility of starting a new church in that little suburb of Seattle. That church is filled with people of strong opinions and disagrees freely and often, but always led by a spirit of love, led by God's Spirit of love, inspired by the Spirit of love that led a man to give his very kidney to save another, simply because they were members of that same church family.