

CROSS-CONNECTIONS

In the first session on Living The Life, we started with “Pruning.” It comes from a parable (John 15) and is clearly a metaphor. We make little progress on the Path until we apply the principle of pruning. It is one of the first and fastest ways to discover if we are really letting the Holy Spirit into our lives. One person has already said to me, “I always thought I was a very good pruner. Now I realize that I have been doing the pruning, not letting the Holy Spirit direct what is and is not to be pruned.” Of course, there is story and experience behind that comment. That is the kind of sharing I hope we will each bring to the table more and more, as the last-Wednesday classes continue. By the way, Harry Kipp will be leading our session on the last Wednesday of August. You also can pick a last Wednesday of the month and get on our calendar.

But I wanted to take the first three sessions on Living The Life. It is important to mix our practice with our theology. So in the first session, we mixed Pentecost with Pruning. In the second session, we said it was essential to remember that we live in a two-dimensional realm. If we are going to Live The Life, that is where we have to live it. It is not a choice between the physical or the spiritual – the two are always linked in our realm. So we live “in, but not of, the world.”

If things get dim or confusing, we may need to revisit these first three sessions. There may even be times when newcomers will find it helpful to take a look at where we are coming from in our practical applications. So now we come to the third class on Living The Life. It makes it harder to Live The Life if we don’t know what we are expecting, what we are hoping for, what we think Jesus is really after. It is my own conviction that the church’s answers to such questions usually range somewhere between vague and dead wrong.

You have heard my litany before, so I will only hint at it. And remember, I am a liberal and live in the liberal wing of the Christian church. “Love your neighbor” has been turned into blatant efforts to enable instead of to redeem. New Life in Christ Jesus is never offered, or even mentioned. Those we claim to be helping are never invited to join us as faithful brothers or sisters – part of the faith family that will now carry the mission to others. Living The Life is explained in terms of “us saving the world” in some way. It is also *limited* to such efforts, as if

there were no other dimensions to Life. That is the short form. The truth is that there are lots of ways in which the church is being vague or wretchedly mistaken about the real purpose and mission of Jesus.

We need to design a button for all of us to wear if we want to be part of The New Church. It will read: “He gives me ME!” That would help some people to decide they do not *want* to be part of us, don’t you think?

I am claiming that the true purpose of Jesus, behind and beyond all the “ifs,” “ands” and “buts,” is summarized here: “He gives me ME!” I am claiming this, and hoping that if you don’t already, you will end up claiming it with me. I am saying that if we are going to Live The Life, more and more we are going to have to make this claim. And that is really tough. It takes away all masks of false humility. It takes away most of our excuses. It takes away many of our desires to waffle or hide our true gratitude and allegiance to Jesus. And it feels questionable, if not just plain wrong, in the face of much that we have been taught about Christianity. On the other hand, it *does* match one well-known proclamation of the Christian Faith: God loves you. And Jesus came to reconcile us to God. That matches with “He gives me ME!”

So let’s admit it: At first, and until we get down past several layers and levels, this claim that “He gives me ME!” is a surprise. Baptism is a drowning. We have teachings from Jesus like, “*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.*” We talk a lot about “surrender” and “pruning” and how the “flesh” is at war with the Spirit. Our history celebrates monastic orders, and many of them had vows of poverty, chastity, and silence. Some of them did a lot of fasting, whipped themselves, wore burlap next to their skin, put pebbles or uncooked peas in their shoes. Our definitions of “saintliness” are usually grim, ascetic, and incompatible with personal pleasures or personal development. It is easy to conclude that Christianity has no room for individuality, personal goals, or any kind of personal fulfillment. Christianity is about turning it over, making sacrifices – not wanting anything for yourself, but only for others.

But our claim in The New Church is that this is a major and terrible misunderstanding of the Christian Faith. All of Christianity is based on relationship. Relationship requires individuality, and, in fact, the more developed an individual is, the more potential there is for relationship. If God loves me and I am trying to kill, subvert, or escape from “me,” what can God do with the love? The problem is that we will not receive

or believe in God's love. To whatever degree that is true, we are sabotaging the relationship between our selves and God. The same principle operates, of course, on every other level of relationship. So we also have problems in our relationships with each other, and precisely because we do not know our true selves – and even more, because we do not have a strong and loving relationship with God. That sounds vague or theoretical to some people. And perhaps it is, on the outer layers. But if there is no God, or if God is not your Creator, or if God does not love you – how much value and worth do you think you have? And where does it come from?

What about other people you are trying to relate to: what value do they have, and where does that come from? No wonder our world is full of relationships so weak they cannot last, and so tentative they do not call forth loyalty, honor, or trust.

Am I suggesting that we can all simply decide one day to value ourselves, and each other, more highly? “Oh, this would be a really good idea – let's just do it. Let's all agree to value ourselves and each other a lot more from now on.” For centuries, people have been trying to “just do it.” And sometimes they have *seemed* to do it, or they thought they had accomplished it – for ten or fifteen minutes. But very quickly the evidence mounts: It is a charade, a pretense. We do not know how to value ourselves. We do not know how to value each other – not in any lasting or meaningful way; not if left to our own devices. Even with the help of a Bill of Rights or a wondrous Constitution – and a determination on everybody's part to honor and keep the precepts, at least at first – it all keeps falling apart. Only, the picture isn't completely clear because some people really *do* believe in God. They value themselves and each other for reasons deeper than the documents know or can keep clear.

Am I suggesting, then, that we do not need to be baptized; that we do not need to be born anew; that we do not need to die to the “old self” or be raised to a new and far more promising self? Of course not! As long as we live in this world and hear its many siren calls – as long as we are trying to see our value, our goals, our worth in terms of the idols (false gods) that our world is so determined to worship – we are in bondage. We cannot know our true selves, or each other, or the God who created and truly loves us.

So on closer examination, all the teachings, principles, and sayings that at first imply to us that the self must be destroyed are in fact talking about a false self – a self of the outer veneer. And all of the teachings

about dying to self – if we track them to Jesus, and listen to what He is really saying – do not leave us selfless or dead to our selves. We die with Christ *in order to be raised with Him*. Cross without Resurrection is a dead-end street. If we get only halfway through the Message, it ends up a terrible aberration. And a good deal of Christendom is just such a terrible aberration.

“You must be born again” does not leave us with death. It leaves us with birth! How is it possible that we do not notice that? Jesus frequently confronts us with the rigors of discipleship – with what it may cost us to follow Him. But where do we think He is leading us, that we would want to follow Him enough to give up anything and everything that gets in the way – abandon anything and everything that tries to stop us? The dead cannot follow anything or anyone. “First Congregational Church of the Zombies” – is that what we really want or believe? My first church out of seminary, I thought that was where I had landed, at least for a while. A lot of Christendom is a serious aberration. Jesus is not about bringing us to death. He is about bringing us to Life. *“I came that you might have LIFE, and have it abundantly.”*

Jesus believes that the rewards of the Kingdom are far better than anything this world has to offer. Jesus is trying to reconcile us to God – that is, strip away all the things that are keeping us from a deep and true love-bond with God. Jesus believes in LIFE – and in the value of human individuals – more than any person who has ever come to our planet before or since. How many times does Jesus stop, in the midst of huge issues and under enormous pressure, to heal one single individual? Is it because that person might be able to help Him with His purposes or problems? Not that we ever see or learn about. *Jesus thinks people are important*. More than that, He thinks individuals are infinitely valuable.

If we are going to follow Jesus and try to be selfless at the same time, it will not work. It will lead us only to confusion and despair. Get bold and brave. Start rechecking your role models. Always track what Jesus is teaching to the end of what He is telling us. Maybe you love St. Francis of Assisi. Fine. He is fascinating. But he is trying to lead people in the wrong direction. Maybe you resonate with Hinduism or Buddhism. Fine. They are both fascinating. But if you trust and believe that Jesus is God’s Messiah, you end up knowing that Hinduism and Buddhism are trying to lead people in the wrong direction – that is, to the abandonment of the self, not to the fulfillment or total development or total valuing of the self.

Christianity, when we hear it correctly, is even proclaiming and promising that the self – each individual – will be valuable, totally worthwhile – awake, aware, in love, and on pilgrimage – forever.

I find that impossible to believe. Well, I believe it because I trust Jesus, but I find it impossible to comprehend. My finite mind balks at inconvenient times. If I head in any direction and go for very far, I come to the limits of my comprehension. If we talk about a million dollars, I can track it to some degree. If we get to a trillion, I really cannot grasp that. I know it's a lot, but it is really very vague. And math is a lot easier to track and comprehend than spiritual dimensions, at least for me. Just a little confession here, friends. If I look out over Seattle or the Los Angeles basin and start to think about "God loves all of them," I cannot track that – I do not comprehend it. I have to get back to the handful I can really love or I cannot be effective; I just get lost, and overwhelmed. I don't know about you, but if I am really going to "follow Jesus," I have to focus on the handful the Spirit assigns to me, and leave the rest to Jesus. That is not a popular or politically correct confession in our time. But if you want to stay in the game and really mean it, I highly recommend it.

Back to our claims about individual worth and importance. *Of course* many will disagree with this. What else would we expect? But let *us* be clear. This is not a careless mistake. This is not a casual claim off on the side or fringe of our faith. This is the promise we trust and the faith we claim: Jesus gives me ME – my true self, my authentic self. I am a person that God created and loves. Hard to imagine. Very hard indeed to remember or trust or keep believing. But true nonetheless. And we will go on believing it, trusting it, and trying to live by it – for as long as we believe in Jesus.

You know what? This has nothing whatsoever to do with it, but the awareness of God's love, more than any other awareness in life, causes me to want to do well, to be responsible, to care about others, to use well the life that has been given me. Deep is the desire – deep is the hunger – to please Him, to show my gratitude, to love Him back. So much so that if I'm not careful, I will lose the grace and start trying too hard.

So Jesus gives and is always giving me ME. This is never a "done deal" in our experience. There are always new levels of the mystery to be revealed. In the spiritual realms, "me" is always far more than I ever

imagined. And “you” are always more than I at first imagined, or indeed ever fully comprehend.

I want to take a moment to connect this with basic and familiar Christian theology. As familiar as the phrases and concepts are, the connections between them and Jesus giving me ME are, for some strange reason, usually muted. So let’s see if we can get and keep the connections really clear.

“And he said to all, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?’” (Luke 9:23-25) (Also Mark 8:34-36 and Matthew 16:24-26; in short, this is one of Jesus’ teachings that everybody remembered.)

What are we “hearing”? This is said to everybody who is present, not just to current followers. There are legitimate reasons for us to conclude that the meaning (which is also an invitation) can be expanded to include all of us – all ages, all genders, all orientations, etc. Not only does that mean none of us should consider ourselves “outside” the teaching, it also opens the borders for evangelism to as wide as we can take them.

Because this is so important, let’s go over it carefully.

We do note that “the self” is precious indeed. The purpose of losing one’s life (in the process of following Jesus) is to find it – to save it. There is endless teaching and preaching about “selflessness.” Whatever wisdom some think it represents, it is *not* the Way of Jesus! Christianity is always about relationship: with God, with Jesus, with each other. I cannot have a relationship with anything or anyone if I have no “self” to relate with – that is, no self out of which to relate. I cannot relate to you if you are busy denying your self, because you then leave me with little or nothing to relate to. (Some of us have certainly learned this the hard way.) In any case, Jesus’ concern and emphasis are on uncovering and saving the true self, not on abandoning the self. In fact, the teaching itself says this in blatant terms: What good is *anything* if we have lost our selves? This is not my opinion; this is Jesus saying, “If you gain the whole world and lose your self, there is no point or purpose to it.” Point-blank and straight-out, Jesus is saying that the reason for turning away from our old selves and coming with Him is because our true selves

are so essential, so important, and so valuable that we must risk everything to find them, know them, claim them, and live out of them. Even if we could exchange the self for “the whole world,” it would end up a totally useless trade.

Having said this, we certainly do not want to miss the main thrust of the teaching: The way to find or save the self is to follow Jesus. We are back into the major threads and themes of the Christian gospel. We find our true self by sacrificing the false self. We have to turn away from the self that is trying to survive or “win” in the physical world – the world of “the flesh” – in order to find the delights and the greater reality of the self in the spiritual dimensions.

The fact that we understand the necessity of pruning does not mean we teach people to grub out the whole tree. The tree (or vine) is really valuable. Its fruit is truly wonderful. The pruning is so the tree can bear more fruit; it is not a desire to kill the tree. Are we all clear about this?

Conversion is to save the self, not to destroy it. Neither is reconciliation with God a desire to kill the self. If the self is dead, no reconciliation is possible. It is all because the self is so important, not because God wants to destroy the self. “He gives me ME!” At last! Thank God! My true self was buried under so much trash, crap, false goals, and stupid values, I couldn’t find it.

That makes it really important to know what we put our trust and our hope in. The Christian claim is that the way to find the true self is to come to Jesus – to turn will and life over to Him. There are many counterclaims – many assertions that there are better and different ways to discover our true selves. In our time and culture, the majority of such claims are non-Christian, and often anti-Christian. I do wish we would stop arguing about such things. I do hope that in The New Church, we will never consider ourselves duty-bound to dissuade or persuade anybody that their way is wrong. If indeed they are finding their true selves, are we not delighted for them? If they are finding their true selves without us, is that not saving us huge amounts of time, energy, and caring? There are more people who need and want the Christian Way than we can keep up with already, so why would we ever want to be jealous or pissy about it?

Jesus, you remember, said He was only coming for the sick – those in need. “*The well have no need of a physician.*” Well, we may think this

includes everybody, but if not – wonderful. If somebody doesn't need us – doesn't need or want Jesus – well and good. We just need to stay a little aware and alert, in case somewhere along the line they change their minds and discover that their need is greater than they thought. After all, that's what happened to us. It could hardly come as a surprise if it happens to some others. But no reason to be argumentative or impatient about it. If evangelism isn't fun, something is awry. As D.T. Niles used to say: "Evangelism is just one beggar telling another beggar where to find food."

Dying "to this world" was necessary for Jesus, or there would have been no way to reveal the depth of our alienation – and the even greater depth of God's love toward us. It was also necessary for Jesus because "the world" (and Satan behind it) was trying so very hard to force Jesus to conform – to abandon His Message and His purposes. The "powers that be" were trying to tell Him: Go back to Galilee and teach timeless truth to a little band of followers there, but in ways that never truly challenge or change the ways of the world or anybody in it.

Paul realizes that this crucifixion is the only way – and *the* WAY – that Jesus or any of His followers can ever break free from "the flesh" – the ways of this physical dimension; the ways of the world as it is. So all the followers will have to "follow Jesus" into crucifixion also – dying to this world and its siren calls. There is no other way to Live The Life that slowly transforms us into the LIFE of our true selves. It takes a Savior. By the Savior's power of love, grace, forgiveness, indwelling, etc., we move toward the self that lives by love, joy, peace, patience, etc.

All the connections are there. They simply get clearer and stronger the more we ponder them. If you are going to Live The Life, it is imperative for you to know that Jesus' true mission and purpose is to give you YOU: To bring you into your own. To reveal to you your true self. He cannot do that without reconciling you to God. It requires a Cross and a Resurrection, and a Pentecost too. That's all part of the WAY. But the real mission and purpose is about the people He loves – the people He is trying to reach. Will you remember that? Will you remember to tell others? Eternity is a long time. If you want to experience it or enjoy it at all, you will need to know your true self, and *be* your true self. Jesus is the Savior. Much of Christendom has gone so selfless that there is nothing left to save. But the truth is, Jesus is so incredible and wonderful and important *because* He gives me ME!