

**The Good Samaritan
Who is my Neighbor?
July 14, 2013
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What connects us?

What keeps us together?

I'm not just talking about here, in this Deer Park space, with each other... but anywhere we go,

Each day we walk---each day we breathe. All of us.

---What binds us together as people? As a whole?

...There's something, isn't there?

So often we see people make trouble for each other. Treat each other wrong.

Make problems out of nothing just for the sake of making problems.

Hurting each other---sometimes in the worst of ways---

---out of spite, or dysfunction, or boredom, or greed.

We all know the world isn't a perfect place, and we're not perfect with each other.

But still, past all of this, there's something that binds us together.

A common thread that ties one soul to another and to another,

from here, in this place--in this moment,

into the next minute and the next, from one place to the other,

and on and on across the world we share.

There's good between us woven through all of that bad stuff

we sometimes find ourselves tangled up in as we go.

The other day, I was listening to a story about a woman
who'd disappeared while on the road with her small son.

Members of the family spoke of having strange dreams--- premonitions---
---while this mother and son remained missing.

Through a series of frantic phone calls, they reported to each other visions of the boy.

A very specific number—16--flashing over and over again in their minds.

A stranger, living in the area, as well, reported a similar experience.

Waking up in the middle of the night, strangely feeling something was wrong,
crying, she left the house.

While out, she spotted the missing woman on the side of the road,

She didn't know the situation or who this person was,

but called the police out of concern. She told them the spot---the place she'd seen her.

The searching family and law enforcement acknowledged all of these things,
but didn't think or do much about them, at the time.

The police drove by the spot the woman reported, but found nothing.

As the days went on, and the mother and son were still nowhere to be found,

One of the officers, his concern inside mounting,

decided to go back to where this stranger in the area said she saw the woman on the road.

Instead of driving by, like the others, he took some extra time and care to stop at the spot.

He decided to get out. Look a little closer.

On the side of the road, he found a small shoe.

His worry spiked, and he walked into the woods.

Looking down over that steep ledge, he saw trees, broken. Debris.

The officer slid down the dirt, walked deeper in, and he saw it.

Between the trees he found the car. Mangled.

Inside the car, he found the woman and her son.

The mother, driving late, had fallen asleep behind the wheel,
and drove off the side of the mountain ledge.

He rushed to the driver's seat and saw she'd been killed on impact.

But her small son, barely breathing beside her, was still alive.

The little boy was rushed to the hospital from that spot
where that stranger saw the woman on the side of the road.

As he recuperated, the child's grandparents, so grateful to have found him alive,
went back to the crash site to make sure nothing was left behind.

There, under the branches and leaves, they found a mile marker. 16.

Remembering the frantic phone calls they'd received from family members,
talking about those images of the boy flashing through their heads, and that number. 16,
They were overwhelmed.

After confirming the mother had died on impact, at the time of the accident,
the stranger's sighting of the woman at the side of the road, right there, at that mile
marker,
stunned them to speechlessness.

It was impossible that the woman had left the scene of the accident to walk up to the
road,

then gone back to sit in her seat.

She'd been gone, for five days, when that stranger saw her there.

The reactions of the family members as they recounted what happened were very visceral.

Deeply emotional. Tears, they tried to hold tight inside, but couldn't. Trembling lips.

As I saw this, tears came to my own eyes. In a small way,

I felt just the slightest sense of what they were feeling as they spoke,
and emotion swelled up inside of me, too.

Particularly while the boy, now an adult, was interviewed about the experience.

His memories were the simple memories of a small boy,
having been so young when it happened.

But he spoke of feeling the impact of the trees hitting the car,
then waking up, next to his mom, not knowing she'd died, just thinking she was asleep.

At first firm in his features, he talked about seeing,
through all of those days he was stuck down there, in that car,

Seeing a vibrant bright light, beside his mother's head. Always there.

Sometimes it stayed around her. Sometimes it went to the back of the car.

At one point, he said he saw it up at the road. But it never left.

His emotions unwillingly rising to his face and eyes,
he went on to say that in that light, he saw the shape of a figure,
but no face or details through the rest.

The young man who was that boy, along with the rest of his family,
could make nothing of all of this,

Except that his mom had stayed with him.

And somehow, through the deep connections between all of these people---
---her family, and the stranger, and her, and her son,

Had maybe lingered. To save her son.

During this interview, the son said,

“when you put all of the pieces of the puzzle together. You take the dream my aunt had. The apparition sighting that woman did see. The lights that I did see, around the car...it had to have been some kind of angel. Whether it was God’s hand, or just a mother looking after her son, I honestly don’t know. But it was something. It was something greater than me. Greater than anything I’ve ever believed.”

Now... this story... it’s amazing to the point where you have to pause for a moment, and wonder what’s real. What’s not.

Seems they all wondered the same.

It’s difficult to believe, and I can’t verify that what they said was true.

But what I do know, in my own experiences with God, and with people, is that a lot of very strange and unexplainable things happen in this life, and it’s just as foolish to dismiss that reality as any other we know as normal.

What I do know, is that the emotion I felt, while seeing them all feel so much, was very real.

Tears came to my eyes again, as I was writing this story down, remembering what I’d seen in those people.

...What is that?

What is this connection between us we feel, while we breathe and walk together through the world?

What was the connection between those people, who experienced those moments around the disappearance of that mother and her son?

What is it that we share so deeply between us
 that we can witness the pain and joy of others, and feel that pain, that joy, ourselves?
 There's something here in this life, that runs between us,
 that holds us together. Not as separate people, but as the same.
 And our scripture reading today---it's one of my favorites---
 ---because it speaks so clearly, so beautifully, about this very thing---
 --this tie between our lives---in just a few sentences.

I want to go back just a little bit further in Luke than where our lectionary left us
 for the readings, because the two verses before, are worth hearing.

From Verse 23...

Then turning to the disciples, Jesus said to them privately, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! 24 For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it."

Then he spoke that beautiful truth we feel so deeply
 in this often strange and mysterious life we share with each other.

From verse 25:

25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 26 He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" 27 He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." 28 And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." 29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" 30 Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' 36 Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the

hands of the robbers?" 37 He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

In these words from Jesus we're so truly blessed to hear and know in our souls,
he tells us about this amazing, God-gift connection between us.

And what does he say?

Does he lead us to feel we live apart from each other?

Does he speak of a distance between our lives, left best alone, as it is?

Does he talk about the value of safely holding tight to our own lives,
independent of one another,

Or our need to keep boundaries up and lines drawn as we live day to day, side-by-side?

He doesn't say any of those things, does he?

Instead, Jesus lifts up those words that tell us to
love the Lord our God with every part of who we are,
and to love our neighbors AS ourselves.

To love the people around us... not as much as we love ourselves, but AS ourselves.

As he tells the parable of the Samaritan...

...a man belonging to a group of people separate in cultural practice and belief from the
Jews...

...a man often despised and held off as separate from the rest on the outside...

... and the one man---the only one, past the priest,

past the Levite, those members of the priestly class----

---who does all he can to help that other person in their time of struggle, paying no
attention

to the differences between them, and giving his love freely and deeply where love was needed.

The lawyer asks Jesus, ‘who is my neighbor?’

And the unspoken answer is, your neighbor is you.

On the outside, there are subtle differences between us,

but inside, we are all the same spirit.

The same life. ...Not singular, but a part of a holy whole.

We share one life, between us, and that is the life of God.

That connection we feel between us as we move along...

...those moments when tears swell into our eyes

as we feel those joys and pains of others rise up in *ourselves*,

That force that drove those people to sense something was wrong

when that woman went missing woman with her son...

...the officer’s concern and need to look closer

in a hope to help this family which on the outside, was not his own...

...the stranger’s waking up crying in the middle of the night,

and calling the police, to go look for what she’d seen...

All of their shared drive, and persistence, and concern...

---That force that led the Samaritan to stop, on the side of that road,

just like that officer searching, to help someone in struggle,

despite the social distance and tangled up muck people had created between people...

---All of this, is that natural and visceral emotion inside of us we call “compassion.”

And that compassion isn't a thought or an idea, separate from ourselves...

...an ideal to reach for, floating out there as a product of the world

we're supposed to grab hold of and nurture if we hope to be good people.

The word "compassion" is a sound we make with our mouths

to express something that's naturally inside of us. A part of who we are.

And it's a part of who we are, because we are all parts of each other.

And it's this truth that exists down deep in our souls, and that flows between each other,

That Jesus asks us to remember---to focus on---as we live day to day, side by side.

Our lives are connected intimately in ways we can't fully understand or explain...

...and we're called to think about this, and embrace this,

and share the love inside of us with each of the faces we see,

Because when we look out from ourselves, into another,

we're looking into the soul inside of ourselves.

We're looking into the soul of God.

And as God loves us, we're called to love God back.

We're called to love each other back.

We're called to think about what the Samaritan did, and do the same.

This morning, we celebrate this love inside of us, and outside of us,

and the ways it's so often miraculously and blessedly shared,

in amazing ways between us,

to help each other through times of struggle as we live connected to the greater life around us.

This morning, let's celebrate the ways we do our best---with everything in our souls---

---to help each other survive,

giving the protective love and light, like that mother for her son,

where and when it's needed, however it needs to be done.

...So that God can work through astounding means---through world, through *us*---

...to let love live, and to create a better, more whole---more holy—world, each new day.

Amen.