

Pastor's Wednesday Message

June 24, 2020

Connections.

This morning, I stood in our memorial garden and led a memorial/committal service for the woman who, until her death a couple of weeks ago, had been Trinity's oldest member. She was just 3 ½ months shy of her 100th Birthday when she died.

Gisele was a remarkable person and I enjoyed her immensely. Laughter came to her easily and frequently. God had gifted her with ready access to a large repository of joy. But she was also a person who was deeply thoughtful about her relationship with God. She was serious about the meaning of God's love, and circumspect about her own worthiness (or lack thereof) of divine favor. She was genuine in her delight in the gracious God who had named her and claimed her as God's own beloved child. When we completed communion she would say with all seriousness, thank you God... and thank you pastor.

When I first met Gisele, she was living with 2 cats, one of whom she called Boo Boo. Boo Boo would often join us on the table as we shared communion and prayer. Perhaps we should have been more serious and circumspect about it all, given the holiness of what was to transpire in the sharing of the sacrament, but when the cat joined us in that way, we both gave in to the mirthful thought of communing cats, and found ourselves laughing hysterically. Once, when I asked the name of the other cat, she told me that was "the other Boo Boo!" and then she crinkled up her nose and laughed. Her wonderful French accent made it all the more charming.

One of the most enduring memories I have of Gisele is what I observed of her a couple of months after she had moved to a senior living facility a number of years ago. As we sat in the hallway and talked and prayed together, there was a steady procession of residents, staff and visitors passing by. Remarkably, she greeted every one of them. She seemed to know every one of her fellow residents, AND their family members – by name! She acted as if she were the mayor of the place!

Until a few years ago, Gisele had lived with her daughter in a house in Skokie. Most often it was just the two of us, so I hadn't seen her with other people. She had always received me warmly and seemed to relish our time together, but I had not seen, until she moved to the senior living facility, just how deeply she delighted in community.

As I remember my friend, Gisele, I keep thinking about how very much she delighted in human community and relationship as a blessing of God. I couldn't escape the conclusion that her ongoing delight in the gift of community had an awful lot to do

with the fact that she was the most consistently joyful almost centenarian I have ever known. It appeared to me that she was of the opinion that each day, God gave her the gifts of life-giving relationship and blessed community, and that, for her part, Gisele opened those gifts each day with absolute alacrity.

As I prepared for her memorial, it occurred to me that, in Gisele, God was giving me a gift of perspective... I too am the recipient of those same daily gifts of connection and blessed relationship with the Lord and with those around me. The question is, will I open those gifts and know the intended joy? Will I smile with Gisele and shout out with Adam as God gifted him with human community, "at last, this one is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh!"

Preparing for Gisele's service brought these thoughts about relationship and blessing to the fore, but truth be told, I had already been thinking about these things a great deal of late. It seems that the pandemic and the enforced isolation from others has led lots of folks to re-think the fundamental blessings of life, especially God's gift of community with others.

This past weekend, Lori and I heard from our old friend, Rick. We had been close in college. We were all active together in the Lutheran Campus ministry at Central Michigan University. Rick was in our wedding way back in May of 1980. Somehow, with the passage of time (a mere 40 years), we lost touch with Rick and he with us. Anyway, just absolutely out of the blue, Rick called to catch up with us, to renew the relationship, to re-access the God-given blessing of relationship. He explained that this is what he had chosen to do as a pandemic project - reconnecting with friends (and in our case, friends in Christ). What joy there is in re-connecting and celebrating community... and an even greater joy to be realized in the coming together of the members of the body of Christ! Hearing from Rick helped me to understand the love of Jesus a bit more, as well as the persistent joy that infected the soul of my 100-year-old friend.

Last week, as happens many weeks, I heard from a number of folks from Trinity - past and present - in response to these Wednesday letters. One family that lives in another state connects with me almost weekly now. Sometimes there's a paragraph. Sometimes there's only a line or two. Always, there is just enough to recognize the relationship we still share in Jesus Christ.

The wife in this particular family is an inveterate welcomer and exuberant hugger. Until these days of Corona distancing, every visit here at Trinity brought a hug from her that conveyed joy in our relationship and our unity in Christ. The e-mails, of course, are not quite the same as an those in-person embraces, but I have discovered that it is enough to make clear that we are still vitally and viscerally connected in this one body of Christ and this family of faith. I have discovered further, that one cannot receive a virtual Jesus hug, & not feel warm joy and a sense of belonging to a reality that is as big as the kingdom. It helps me to understand Gisele.... And Jesus.

A few weeks ago, having not seen our friends Pete and Cynthia since we left Spokane some 20 years ago, Lori decided to connect and renew the relationship with these dear friends in Christ. So we set up a Zoom call and waited impatiently for two weeks to see them. I had baptized Cynthia. Lori shared leadership of the youth group with her. Pete served as council president. We spent time together otherwise.

There was much to celebrate and much to remember. There were so many blessings God had given us when we were together, and so many promised for the future. What was most striking about the time together in our hour plus long videoconference was the inescapable sense that we were picking up right where we left off. Along with the conversation of what was new in the past 20 years, came a whole flood of memories of shared blessings, shared tragedy, shared joy, laughter and tears. It was an opportunity to taste once more the sweetness of our time together. I could not help but feel the incursion of a deep, warm joy in this recovery of essential community in Christ, and the receipt of these living gifts of a loving God given for mutual blessing. It reminds me again of why my 99-year-old friend, Gisele, was still smiling a few months shy of her 100th birthday. God is good!

I pray for you that you might know the sort of joy my friend Gisele knew for all of those 99 years. May you know the powerful love of the Savior in each and every circumstance of life, and may it bring a smile to your lips, and lightness to your Spirit. May you cultivate relationships of love with those whom God has given into your life. May you open those gifts each day with intentionality and alacrity... so that you may receive God's great gift of community.

And if you are wondering just what your next pandemic project should be, maybe you could take a page from our friend Rick's playbook. Rather than simply lamenting the loss of community caused by this terrible pandemic, plan to call someone each week with whom you've not connected in years. Perhaps together, you can open God's gift of joy in holy community once again!

God bless you Gisele, as you have blessed me. God bless you, people of God!

Pastor Brown