

Jesus has leveled the playing field for all, granting us all access to grace, love, and forgiveness--and encouraging us to love one another and treat each other kindly. You'd think that we could be living in heaven on earth and yet, we're not. As Christians, we are still very much a work in progress. In a world where you can be anything, be present to others...be kind...be transformational.

When I was a college student in Boston, just across the river at Harvard, students were striking. If I remember correctly, they were making a lot of noise about allowing the secretaries, lab techs, and library assistants to have access to the same benefits as the professors. As the daughter of a college professor, attending the college of my choice because my dad's work paid 50% of the tuition, this hit home. I wondered if other college workers' children had the same access to benefits. I also remember that I thought it was pretty amazing that students were standing up for the secretaries.

Around the same time, I remember hearing a story of several people who were up for a nursing job at a local Boston hospital. These were all internal candidates. There were a number of interview questions and all of the applicants answered similarly. Until the last question: "Can you give me the first name of one of the custodians on the floor where you work?" Despite the fact that they'd all worked every day with the custodians, only one person knew. That person got the job. The question set everyone apart. The only person who could see that everyone on the staff played a part in the overall function of the organization was the one they wanted.

I think what impressed me about those stories was the boundary-breaking" nature of both of these events. By the way, it's a false 'societal' boundary at that. As I shared a moment ago, in God's kingdom, everyone is equal. Jesus came here for the benefit of all—not just Jewish men—but women and children, too. And not just Jewish people, but Gentiles, too. Not just the citizens, but also foreigners. Remember, Jesus said to Love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. When asked, "Who is my neighbor?" he shared the story of the Good Samaritan because Samaritans and Jews didn't get along at the time. The Apostle Paul sums it up in Galatians (3:28), "There is no longer Jew or Greek, Slave or Free, Man or Woman...we're all one in the family of Christ.

We are all one in the human race. It's not about what you have, but how you treat others that counts.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul talks of personal ethics and values and how we're to treat others in community--all others. Be present and open to all. Observe and engage, whether it's providing for needs, extending hospitality, or simply bearing witness and engaging with others in their joy or sorrow.

That's a lofty goal, for sure, and one that in our culture, is often reserved exclusively for ministers, therapists, and immediate family members. (Providing for needs, extending hospitality or crying or rejoicing with others as they do so.) We may think that we are open to others. But could we be more so? What if we listened twice as much as we spoke? What if we really did put ourselves in others' shoes? We would surely be far more understanding, more empathetic, and more connected. Authentic, genuine connection is the name of the game.

Much as we're all tired of hearing about Covid-19 and even more drained by experiencing the direct or indirect effects of it, we can remember that perhaps our greatest moment is ahead of us: today even. Perhaps the greatest and highest good we can achieve is to be in harmony with each other. Maybe that's the purpose of life.

Have you ever wondered about the meaning of life? There are many who can point to *something* and say that they have had a meaningful life. There are those who have won the Nobel prize, and those who invented a vaccine, and those who have written best-sellers. While achievements such as those are certainly commendable, maybe, for even more of us, it's not one big thing that will define our lives, but a million little things...all related to how we interact with others.

Paul says ‘be in harmony--don’t be haughty’. Associate with others who are not like you. Paul says, “the lowly” and he likely means ‘the have nots’ or those without power. Harmony comes from the Greek word ‘harmonia’ which means joint or agreement. When you have harmony in music, you’re playing two or more notes simultaneously. They are not alike, but they work together.

Particularly in this time of pandemic, (when people are feeling tender and isolated), let’s heed Paul’s words that speak to values about how we treat ourselves and others. Former Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy wrote about the importance of human connection in his book, *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World*. He says that connection is an actual inherent need. While today we may not need a group for our very physical survival in quite the same way as we did in ancient times, we still very much need each other for our emotional survival.

Where we might say something like we feel as though we’re carrying the weight of the world on our shoulders, or we feel as though we always have to be the one to call our friends or we wouldn’t talk to them, or if we disappeared tomorrow, no one would notice. He names it. Loneliness. And he talks about the shame people feel for being lonely.

Think about it. At a very basic, very subconscious level we still have that innate need to be with others because we don’t all have the same skills and talents...and, here’s something I learned at the Mass General Hospital/Harvard Medical School Mind/Body Medicine Conference I attended last year: at an even more basic and very subconscious level, we need to feel attractive to others in order to keep the world going through procreation. So, yes, stemming from a very basic and subconscious level, there is shame associated with feeling lonely. Before the pandemic, Dr. Murthy noted that 22% of Americans suffered from loneliness. 1 in 5. And I can’t even imagine how those numbers have escalated since we’ve altered our lifestyles. He says it affects us mentally and physically. Loneliness is associated with risky behaviors that tend to numb us, but also with such things as “an increased risk of heart disease, dementia, depression, anxiety, sleep disturbances and even premature death”. (<https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/05/11/853308193/in-together-former-surgeon-general-writes-about-importance-of-human-connection>).

In a radio interview given just a few months ago, in May, he said that Covid-19 “could take us down one of two paths. One path is the worrisome one, marked by greater loneliness as we spend more and more time physically separated from one another. But the other path is the path of social revival, if we recommitted to people and to relationships. We have the opportunity to use this moment to re-center our lives on people. And if we do that, then I believe we can come out of this pandemic more connected, more fulfilled and more resilient than before the pandemic began.”. (<https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/05/11/853308193/in-together-former-surgeon-general-writes-about-importance-of-human-connection>).

So let’s heed the lessons the Apostle Paul shared. Be good to each other-everyone-and always. By being good and living in harmony, you can transform situations, and people, and even overcome evil.

As George E. Odell says, *We Need One Another*. “We need one another when we mourn and would be comforted. We need one another when we are in trouble and afraid. We need one another when we are in despair, in temptation, and need to be recalled to our best selves again. We need one another when we would accomplish some great purpose and cannot do it alone. We need one another in the hour of our success, when we look for someone to share our triumphs. We need one another in the hour of defeat, when with encouragement we might endure and stand again.... All our lives we are in need, and others are in need of us.” (Singing the Living Tradition, #468, Beacon Press, 1993) Blessed be and amen.