

What is the Meaning? Created for Connection

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It was tough living in New Testament times. That's why the Bible speaks so often of fear and anxiety, and of trust and hope. Scripture doesn't approach the topic with mere platitudes, much less shame. Instead, they offered a different perspective, a perspective based on a different reality, a deeper truth... like this passage: ***For God did not give us a spirit of timidity or cowardice or fear, but [He has given us a spirit] of power and of love and of sound judgment and personal discipline [abilities that result in a calm, well-balanced mind and self-control] (II Timothy 1:7, AMP).***

That's why instead of choosing fear or folly, we choose wisdom. That's been our approach at Hosanna... to honor each other's responses to the current situation, yet also apply wise sound judgment about how best to be safe for each other and ourselves. This is what Christians have done in similar situations through the centuries. For example, **Martin Luther**, the leader of the Protestant Reformation, lived through an epidemic of the Black Death... far more devastating than what we're experiencing. And this was his response to it...

I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine, and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance inflict and pollute others and so cause their death as a result of my negligence. If God should wish to take me, he will surely find me... If my neighbor needs me, however, I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely as stated above. See this is such a God-fearing faith because it is neither brash nor foolhardy and does not tempt God. In short, he was going to take necessary precautions for himself and others, to risk his life if love for his neighbor demanded it, and to trust God for the rest.

Sounds wise, eh? And for similar reasons here we are again, meeting online when we'd rather be meeting in person. We miss you! But isn't it wonderful that we can at least do this? We may feel isolated but we're not. Not really. We can be separated physically, yet still connected, still in relationship, still engaged. And we're here on purpose, because there's **meaning** in what we're experiencing. So that's what we're talking about today and the next few weeks... what the meaning of this experience is... or could be... for us, because we don't want to miss the grace that's hidden in all this craziness... ☺

History is full of Christians who were able to read the signs of their times, and respond with wisdom, grace, and courage. Tony just mentioned Martin Luther... and two centuries before him lived another example of wisdom and grace during terribly frightening times...

Julian of Norwich was born in England about 1342, and when she was around 30 years old, became so sick that she nearly died. When her illness broke, Julian was given 16 visions over a few hours... "Showings" ... from the suffering Jesus which changed her life completely. She dedicated her life to Christ and became an **anchorite**... someone who lived physically enclosed in a small cell (anchorhold), usually attached to a church... isolated except for food passed through a window. **Julian, though, did have a cat...** and is usually pictured with it. ☺

Yet, even though she was physically isolated, she was **connected beyond the walls around her...**

... to her community – Julian lived in truly one of the worst times in history – a time of social turmoil, filled with famine and plague... which killed over 1/3 of the population. Carts piled with dead bodies were hauled past Julian's window. She was enclosed, but not cut off... and deeply connected to her neighbors as they came to her window for prayer, blessing, and spiritual direction. She loved her community... and for nearly 20 years, continued to ask Jesus to understand the visions, which seemed to utterly contradict the circumstances. She wanted to understand so that she might offer Christ's comfort and care to those beyond her window.

Julian was connected to her community... and also connected

...to God – No matter how bad things got, Julian never let go of her faith. She had lots of questions for God... and asked them... but she would not allow herself to be isolated from Christ. For decades, she remained connected to Jesus... through this ongoing prayer on behalf of others...

And staying connected to God in prayer meant that, through Him, she was also connected

...to the world – Julian knew that God was not only present with her in her cell... or through her to her community. Through Him, she was also connected to everyone in the world. She kept questioning Jesus about their well-being... and a lot about what would happen to those who never heard the Gospel. And Jesus would reassure her again and again... explaining the visions... like the one where she saw a **hazelnut in her hand...** and God showed her the meaning: **"It is all that is made.... It lasts and ever shall, for God loves it. And so have all things their beginning by the love of God... God made it... God loves it... and God keeps it."** God loves everything and everyone that He has created...

And this is the God we know and serve and are talking about here. The existence of this kind of God was a "revolutionary revelation" to the people of the first century. Nearly all of the ancient world believed that **gods lived in a physical location on earth**. But their longing for something or someone more and better was evident in the monument in Athens to "an unknown god". So when the apostle Paul visited there, and saw those temples and that monument, he told them who the unknown God was. Standing **on top of Mars Hill**, where the schools of philosophy would meet and argue about what was really real and really true, where I had the chance to stand just two weeks ago... he pointed up to the **larger hill of the Acropolis**, on which sat not one, but three famous temples to their gods, and said...

***The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else... God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.'* (Acts 17:24-28 NIV).**

Paul won some converts that day... because **it's good news!** Look beyond what you can know and see with your physical eyes, he said, to experience the reality that is always present... the God who has come to be with us... all of us... the invisible Spirit who fills the earth with his presence and even fills the space

between us. “In him we live and move and have our being.” God is the breath of life for all humans, and his breath... his Spirit... is what connects us all, whether we’re aware of it or not. His breath is the air we breathe. His presence is the water we drink. That’s our **connection to the world**, like Julian’s.

And then the Spirit offers to all the invitation to go even further... to be **connected to God**, again, like Julian was. The Bible says that God ***gave us the very great and precious promises. With these gifts you can share in God’s nature (II Peter 1:4 NCV)***. We’re not just worshipping God from afar; through his Spirit we actually share his life... we become one with him. The Spirit comes to dwell in us, and we live in him, and so we are connected with God far beyond the imaginations of even many who are Christians.

And that connection to God allows us to be **connected, then, to our community**, just like Julian was... because it’s the same Spirit in each of us... and that’s one reason we honor each other. The Spirit of God in *me* recognizes, honors, and connects with the Spirit of God in *you*... wherever you are! We are connected by the Spirit... wherever we are! The Holy Spirit is the connection between each individual person... and, in Christ, the one who joins us together as one... the invisible Body of Christ

Julian called this spiritual union “Oneing” ... ***“The place which God takes in our soul he will never vacate, for in us is his home of homes, and it is the greatest delight for him to dwell there.... The love of God creates in us such a oneing that when it is truly seen, no person can separate themselves from another person.”*** And this is the message Jesus proclaimed... the core meaning of the Gospel... As Paul explained to the Ephesians (4:2-6 ESV) -- ***Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit -- just as you were called to one hope when you were called -- one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.***

And one of the beautiful things this Union... this Oneing... creates is **Presence**... ***“a person or thing that exists in a place without being seen. (Lexico/Oxford Dictionary)*** Sounds kind of spooky or “woo woo” at first... but just consider that the only reason you can see and hear this message is because you and your device are anchored securely to the ground. Gravity holds everything in the universe together... its invisible “presence” can be experienced, but nobody can actually explain how gravity works! In the same way, we are all immersed in the invisible Presence of God’s Spirit... which holds us together with God and each other in a way that nobody can actually explain... yet we experience its effects.

Like when you’re in a room and someone enters unseen, **yet you “sense” someone is there**... or you may be in a crowd of people and have a “sense” of being looked at... so you look around and catch eyes with another person gazing at you... and sometimes, you’re also able to “sense” by the look on their face or their body language why they are gazing at you... 😊 This invisible “sense”... this silent “knowing”... is a form of presence. Presence is an experience of our invisible connection with God and others...

After all, that’s what God created us for, right? For connection with Him and each other? That’s the story we are told in Genesis... that we were created in God’s likeness and image... created by love (God is Love)... in love... for love. And after creating us, God stood back and gazed wordlessly on all He had made, all of its physical glory... and then God spoke, “Behold”... literally, an exclamation of deep inner satisfaction... “Oh my... **it is VERY GOOD**... it not only looks good/beautiful... but it **IS** good and

beautiful!” God gazed on us in love then... and today, God is still gazing on us... but that doesn’t always feel like a good thing to us, does it? Because we’ve been taught a lot of things about God that aren’t actually true or real. Even Christians have a hard time actually letting themselves feel the Presence of God’s invisible gaze on them... so, **What do you assume God feels when God looks at you?** Anger? Disappointment? Disgust? Rejection? But how do you know whether your assumptions are true?

David Benner writes: **“Ask Christians what they believe about God, and most will have a good deal to say. However, ask the same people what they know about God from direct personal experience, and most will have much less to say.... Any authentic spiritual journey must grow from a direct, personal experience of God.”** And right now, we are inviting you to risk actually allowing yourself to feel God’s invisible gaze on you... and to let yourself “sense” what God is really feeling toward you. This might take a bit of time... so you can pause this recording... take as much time as you like... and then come back. If you’re ready, go ahead and do that now... Or, you can listen to the end, and find some time today or this week to let God show you whether what He really feels about you... and when you do... as Benner says:

“What a different relationship begins to develop when you realize that God is head-over-heels in love with you. God is simply giddy about you. He just can’t help loving you. And he loves you deeply, recklessly and extravagantly – just as you are. God knows you [sin], but your sins do not surprise him. Nor do they reduce in the slightest his love for you.... When God thinks of us he feels a deep, persistent longing – not simply for our wholeness but, more basically, for our friendship. This possibility lies at the core of our own deepest desires. It also lies at the core of our deepest fulfillment.”

We have trouble trusting some times that this is true... because we make choices that separate us from God, the world, and our community. But though we lost sight of God... and still do!... God never takes his gaze off of us. **This is good news again!**... no matter how we feel about ourselves, the world, or God even this very moment, God has re-connected the broken connections for you, for me, for all of us. In Christ, we now have spiritual eyes to see and spiritual ears to hear and spiritual presence to experience those re-connections. We can live today differently as a result... which is really, really important in a world that feels less connected as a result of social distancing, fear, political turmoil, and a nasty little virus. So let’s get real practical with this. How do we live out our connectedness in response to **three significant experiences** that we and others may be having in the current challenge? I’m referring here specifically to feelings of loss, loneliness, and lovelessness. Anyone feeling any of that right now?

First, nearly all of us have feelings of **loss** right now... we’ve lost control of our ability to come and go as we wish, to see whom we wish, to buy what we wish. Our schedules have been up-ended, our work has been disrupted, our family lives have been radically altered, and the things we count on for daily life... **toilet paper**, for example!... are either not available or less available. We can’t even have birthday parties for our kids! And there are losses of a deeper nature... people are losing their lives, and others are losing loved ones, sometimes without even being able to be with them or to have a funeral.

So what do we do with loss when we’re connected to the Spirit? Well, our primary response is to remember what we have gained... which is **an eternal treasure that can never been taken away from us**. Gratitude is the response of a life permanently connected to its Source. This might be an excellent

time to keep a **gratitude journal**. And if you're a social media user, to post words of thanksgiving and appreciation. This might be a time to get out in nature and remember what's really real about the world, and what's really good. Let's continue to turn feelings of loss into echoes of laughter.

Now, how about **loneliness**? This is particularly hard for those who live alone. But we can feel lonely in a crowd, or in a home with other people. We need a deeper connection than just being in the same room with other people. And that's why this message is such good news!... because of the presence of God in the world, and in each of our lives. **We are connected**...already! If this crisis is going to give us anything good, let's allow it to reveal the deep and abiding connection we have with each other and with God, no matter what, no matter where. Now, that connection needs to be nurtured and strengthened, of course. Our way of meeting today is unusual and temporary, but it's connection nonetheless.

How can we **strengthen the connection** with each other even if we can't be in the same room? We have marvelous online technology, but we also still have the phone. And the USPS. And the ability to sing across empty streets through open windows, as they're doing in Italy. Don't wait for someone to connect with you... take the initiative. Reach out. Give someone a virtual hug, a reason to laugh, a reminder that THEY are not alone. No one in the kingdom of God is ever alone. No one. Ever. We have the presence of God, and it's a shareable presence. ☺

And that's good news for those who are feeling a twinge of **lovelessness**. Our world has for generations lied to us by telling us that we need another human being to love us deeply, romantically even, in order to live a meaningful life. And so we have millions of people staving off feelings of lovelessness or depression because they don't seem to have that kind of intimate connection with others...and those feelings get worse in a time of isolation. It's brutal...and **it's unnecessary**.

God cares about the loveless. And part of God's care is to persuade us that we were never, are never, will be never without love. Yes, that can sound like just a lot of rhetoric sometimes. But in moments like this, there's an opportunity to really let it sink in. Let's take this breath-catching moment to truly ponder, to truly test whether the love of God is enough for us. Maybe this week is an invitation to **"count the ways"** you are loved, and then count the ways you love. And celebrate each one. ☺

What we should NOT do with our feelings of loss, loneliness, or lovelessness is run from them. Don't medicate them with substance abuse or addictive fantasies. Rather, Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that we "dirty our hands" with the emotions that rattle us most: **After years of being taught that the way to deal with painful emotions is to get rid of them, it can take a lot of reschooling to learn to sit with them instead, finding out from those who feel them what they have learned.** We have much to learn this week by connecting with others... those who share our emotions and have something to teach us about them, those to whom we have wisdom to offer about dealing with loss, loneliness, and lovelessness, and those who can persuade our hearts to trust love again...

At the beginning of this message, Tony talked about seeking wisdom in these scary times... asking God, as Julian did, to show us His meaning in it all. Well, Julian finally got her answer for her times... and the answer Jesus gave her then is still just as true today...

Do you want to know what your Lord meant? Know well that love was what he meant. Who showed you this? Love. What did he show? Love. Why did he show it to you? For love. Hold fast to this and you will know and understand more of the same; but you will never understand or know from it anything else for all eternity. This is how I was taught that our Lord's meaning was love. And I saw quite certainly in this and in everything that God loved us before he made us; and his love has never diminished and never shall. And all his works were done in this love; and in this love he has made everything for our profit; and in this love our life is everlasting.

We were **created for connection**...by the Spirit in whom we live and move and have our being, by the Spirit who dwells within each of us who are in Christ, by the Spirit who makes us one with each other, no matter where we are. So let's close by sharing the Spirit's presence between and within us in a connecting prayer. We will pray through this... and ask that you also participate... by saying the parts in bold with us out loud, wherever you are... whether with others or not... and experience the Presence of God, and the presence of God's people, and the presence of love.

**Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.**
Isaiah 41:10

LEADER:

Let us pray to God, who alone makes us dwell in safety:
For all who are affected by coronavirus,
through illness or isolation or anxiety,
that they may find relief and recovery:

ALL: Lord, graciously hear us.

LEADER:

For the vulnerable and the fearful,
for the gravely ill and the dying,
that they may know your comfort and peace:

ALL: Lord, graciously hear us.

LEADER:

For physicians and nurses,
respiratory technicians and medical researchers,
that through their skill and insights many will be restored to health:

All: Lord, graciously hear us.

LEADER:

For those who are guiding our nation at this time,
and shaping national policies, that they may make wise decisions:

ALL: Lord, graciously hear us.

LEADER:

For our homes and families,
our schools and communities,
that our neighborhoods may be places of trust and friendship,
where all are known and cared for:

ALL: Lord, graciously hear us.

LEADER:

For the Christian community
that we would be people of courage... not fear,
people of generosity... not greed,
people who love our neighbors as ourselves.

ALL:

**We are your people, God, made in your likeness and image:
giving and loving,
wherever we are,
whatever it takes,
for as long as is needed
that your will would be done
on earth as it is in heaven.**

(Adapted from Barbara Glasson, President, Methodist Conference)

LEADER:

**And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding,
will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.**

Philippians 4:7

ALL

AMEN... MAY IT BE SO!