

“Opt in for Connection”
By Rev. Katrina Pekich-Bundy
John 4.1-30
Ruth 1.6-18
November 20, 2022

Through observational evidence I have found that there have been weeks since March 2020 that have been particularly challenging for people. These are weeks of intense feelings, of strange occurrences, of struggling and wondering what could possibly be next. These are from hearing anecdotally from people within churches and in community, in my experience in Indiana and here, people of all ages, in all sorts of circumstances. It is almost as if everyone in the world simultaneously throws their hands in the air and goes, “What is going on?”

Last week was a week like that. I found that it was a week of strange happenings, big feelings, and wondering if everyone has absolutely lost common sense and respect for one another. I heard this from friends and colleagues and community members. I think we had these sorts of weeks before - and they were maybe jokingly described in terms of moon phases. My mother used to say, “Oh, it’s a full moon! That means strange things will happen!” My mother is very superstitious, so I would roll my eyes at her, while also keeping guard for whatever werewolves might come about from the moon. Whether we explained it as being Mercury in retrograde or just strange happenings, I think that since the pandemic began, these weeks are more intense, and it is almost as if it is in sync for everyone.

I think it is worth noting that we’ve made it this far. We stayed home, isolated from family and friends, to stay healthy. We did the Zoom meetings, we had long distance Thanksgivings, and we did our best in a world that seemed unimaginable. And we didn’t do it alone, even though we might have had times in which we felt alone and lonely.

Now we are continuing in a world that is still unimaginable; one where COVID isn’t gone but we are better prepared with vaccines, one in which we have witnessed people going on strike, or quiet quitting, or staying in their jobs even though they have been put in stressful conditions and expected to take on even more responsibility with very little pay. We’ve seen the ugly truth of racism in this country - a truth that has always been there but has been hidden and ignored to those who have the privilege to look away.

I imagine that we navigate this new world much as we did the stay-at-home COVID times - with each other. It is through connection with God and one another that we have made it thus far, and that I imagine we will continue to have hope in a broken world. In the times in which I have felt alone or lost in this world, I have received an unexpected card from a friend who had no idea, but wanted to just surprise me. I’ve found relief from friends with listening ears, who laugh with me and cry with me. When I feel outraged at injustice, I am comforted that God - the God who is with us, Immanuel, is the God who sits in the ashes with us and is also outraged by injustice. It is through these connections that we are comforted.

Connection is hugely important in scripture and in faith. Our theme today is to opt into connection. The theme is for our stewardship campaign, each week we opt into something, showing that we support and invest our time, energy, and money into a ministry of the church.

The first week we opted into service, talking about the various ministries you can opt into, like Community Cafe and the Food Pantry, as well as various committees. Last week we opted into growth. This week we opt into connection.

While all relationships have ups and downs, it is easier to reach out to a friend or family member that we have a relationship with or that we know well. Building relationships is more difficult. It is easier to go to an event, or a worship service, or a meal when you know someone you care about will be there.

Scripture, though, reminds us that we are called to difficult relationships. We are called to connect with those either on the margins, or that perhaps we struggle to relate to for some reason.

We start with the story of Ruth. The book of Ruth is one that tells the story of two widows who support one another. Ruth and Orpah had been married to Naomi's sons. Naomi's husband and both of her sons died, and neither Ruth nor Orpah had children. In those days the financial support came from the male having a job, and without a male heir or family member the widows were often marginalized, dependent upon the community.

Naomi knew that the road ahead would be difficult after the death of her sons and her husband. She recognized that her daughters in law still had a possibility of finding another spouse and starting their lives over, and so she gave them her blessing to turn away with no hard feelings. Orpah chooses to go back home, with no resentment from Naomi. Ruth clings to her mother-in-law and gives what has become perhaps the most common words in the book of Ruth: "Do not press me to leave you, to turn back from following you! Where you will go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God." Ruth chose to return with Naomi, knowing this would be a difficult road.

Most likely this was not an easy choice, but maybe it was made slightly easier knowing that Naomi was a familiar face - a caring family. We don't know anything about Ruth's family of origin, or if they might have supported her after this life change. It is not a simple move, though, because Ruth enters a new country, a new culture, and tells Naomi that "your people will be my people." She embraces not only Naomi, but her people - strangers.

The Gospel reading gives an example of Jesus' connection to the marginalized. He approaches a well during the day, which would have been unexpected for a male Palestinian in that time. There were certain times that women and men approached the well, and certain times Palestinians would, different than Samaritans. This woman at the well is a Samaritan and he speaks to her, which is even more unexpected because of gender roles and cultural differences. She recognizes how strange this is and when he asks her for a drink she responds: "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" With the parenthetical "Jews did not share things in common with Samaritans."

Jesus and the woman have ongoing conversation - why is he asking her for a drink? Who does this man think he is? Jesus calls out that she should call her husband, and she corrects him, saying she doesn't have one, and he states that he knows this to be true, offering information about her that no one else knows. He talks about living water, water for which no one ever goes

thirsty. She believes in him, and this woman becomes the first evangelist in scripture, telling the town about Jesus and his living water.

Jesus talked to this woman when many others wouldn't. He opted into connection - what might have been uncomfortable for some. I believe it is easy to talk about opting into connection with people for whom we are familiar, and that we have things in common, but it is harder to opt into connection when we are unfamiliar with them. There are many reasons we might hesitate to connect - if we're introverted, any conversation with a stranger is intimidating sometimes. If we are not in a familiar place or don't know anyone it is more difficult to connect. Sometimes I find it comforting to have one person I know so that I can be introduced, or have a conversation buffer.

I believe that we truly want to opt in to connection with the community and the college - but it is easier said than done. For some of you that might be easier than others - if you work at the college, you already have connections there and are familiar with the space. I am there twice a week and I still sometimes have difficulty connecting with people - so I want you to know I completely understand that there is a barrier. At the beginning of this year I was asked to speak as part of a panel at a First Year Seminar event. They asked us questions about our own college experiences. And, even though I speak in front of people on at least a weekly basis, I was completely nervous and afraid - for no real reason other than I didn't know any of these students because they were new. The only thing that gave me any confidence was knowing that I was on stage with my colleagues and peers and felt connected to them.

I've heard from students that walking from campus to here on Sunday mornings is difficult - because that gap, which I've started calling "the moat" of two blocks, is intimidating. If they don't know anyone here, it makes it more difficult to want to walk across that moat to get here. I know that if my college roommate wasn't going to church on Sunday mornings back in college, I wouldn't have made it one day.

So, within our context, we have to sometimes go outside our comfort zones to opt into connection. If ever you think you want to try but are nervous, I'm always happy to be that connecting point, do introductions, help create conversations, build relationships. But we have to start somewhere.

In your groups, talk about what prevents you from building those relationships in the community and at the college? What are some ways we can break that barrier?