PSALMS 133:1-3 (NRSVUE)

How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity!
2 It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down upon the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down over the collar of his robes.
3 It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion.
For there the Lord ordained his blessing,
life forevermore.

* * *

EPHESIANS 4:1-6, 11-13 (NRSVUE) ***I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace: 4there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, 5one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. …11He himself granted that some are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers 12to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.***

The Word of God for the people of God…

Recently I read an announcement from the U.S. surgeon general that said many Americans are experiencing increased levels of loneliness, in part a lingering symptom of pandemic isolation. As a pastor, I note that those increased levels of loneliness build on an already present trend that goes back at least to the mid-90s. Psychiatric studies have documented a steady and dramatic increase in loneliness and isolation resulting from radical individualism that discounts most forms of community. A parallel and related trend is a critical increase in consumption of anti-depressants, anti-anxiety medications, and suicide.

Casper ter Kuile is a Ministry Innovation Fellow at Harvard Divinity School, the author of *The Power of Ritual*,[1] and founder and cohost of the award-winning podcast, "Harry Potter and the Sacred Text."

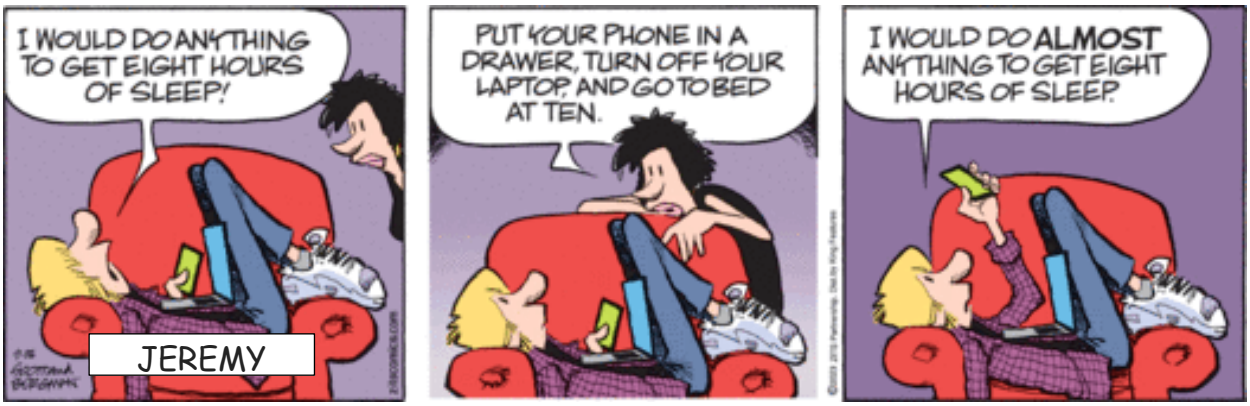
He says we are in crisis today. Our modern technological society leaves too many of us—no matter our ages—feeling isolated and without purpose. Previous bases of community and meaning no longer support us. His hopeful new message is that we might not be religious, but that doesn't mean we are any less spiritual.

Instead, we are in the midst of a paradigm shift in which millennials seek belonging and meaning in secular rituals. Today, we find connection in:

- *Harry Potter* and other books that offer universal lessons without the religious rituals that spoke to a mid-20th century culture but are meaningless (and frankly boring) to a 21st century .com generation.
- Today, Gratitude Journals have replaced traditional prayer; and
- Tech breaks provide mindful moments of calm.

[1] HarperOne, June 15, 2021.

I hope Jerry Smith and Jim Borgman will see my use of their September 15 "ZITS" Comic Strip, not as copyright infringement but as free advertising:



Add the obvious rise in social media usage and decreased participation in organized religion, and cultivating community and connectedness becomes more important than ever. Now, we easily notice that our children and grandchildren are connected almost obsessively to their friends; but that connectedness is not really community. The usual collective of millennial friendship is very small and isolated, and too frequently serves as a kind of insulation *from* community.

That's why ter Kuile and Alec Gewirtz co-founded "Nearness," an online cooperative that offers eight-week courses in which groups of around six people meet online to self-reflect, experiment with varieties of spiritual practices (including secular), and develop meaningful, supportive connections with one another.

Says ter Kuile: "You learn about and reflect on big life questions like, 'Where do I belong?' 'How do I live a good life?' 'What does it mean to have hope in difficult times?' And about grief, loss, the natural world; all these kinds of rich conversations that maybe we don't have time for every day. But when you meet in a Nearness group each week, you have time and space to really pay attention to those questions.

"There's something really beautiful about being able to show up for other people, and having them show up for you. So, there's this mutuality to the experience, which means people kind of learn to love each other. That's what it comes down to, even across distance and difference. It's really beautiful."

What I note is that he is describing qualities and traits that typified church before it was hijacked by corporate organizational structures and business standards of success during the middle of the 20th century. The focus on organization and standards of success more or less froze the church in a 1940s/50s/60s model that got left behind by Intelligence Technology and never adapted its method of communicating and demonstrating the Gospel to the changing language and culture of later generations.

We don't change the message; but there's no common language. Missionaries

learn the language and cultural habits of those to whom they are sent to serve.

So, take away "church speak" and almost all humans exhibit the same kind of seeking, yearning behavior: we all are seeking love and affirmation and a connection with something bigger than we are—something that calls us beyond ourselves. And we who know the comfort and energy of Christian community have difficulty identifying with the gross loneliness and isolation of those who've given up on an organized religion that does not speak their language.

We're living today in a spiritual culture much like the culture into which Jesus sent the disciples when he gave them the Great Commission: "Go. Make disciples in every culture; teaching and initiating them into the community of faith." I think we have to become a "Great Commission" church—we have to go where they are, because it's becoming undeniably evident: they won't be coming where we are!

What if, as part of the Relaunching of our presence and work in this community we could translate the message of our text from Ephesians 4—if we could say what that text says, but in the language and cultural experience of generations born after 1980… and what if we took that message *where they are* and shared it—better yet—demonstrated it in a language and cultural pattern they understand? And what if we did that *for their sake—no strings attached*—to be there for them and heal their loneliness and isolation—to embrace them in a loving, supportive connection with no expectation that they will add to our numbers or adapt to our spiritual comfort level or that they will even call that connection "church"?

Might we, in that venture, create *and experience* true Christian community? Paraphrasing Jarret Banks and adding some of my own thoughts:

The good news for people like you and me who do not have all the answers, who accept and even embrace the mystery of it all, who do more pondering than knowing and more wondering than concluding, is that we have experienced love—holy, sacred, divine, mysterious, incredulous but certain love. And although we cannot fully comprehend the power of love or the Source of love, we believe with confidence that it is love that has brought us to this place we call church. And, with all our misgivings and misunderstandings, with all our doubts and unanswered questions, we somehow, some miraculous way, sense that it is love that keeps us here."

I mean, in any language, in any culture or generation, what part of "love your neighbor," is so difficult to understand? What part of "love your enemies?"

I know, without a doubt, I have experienced with absolute certainty that Love is present here in this church, and Love is calling us with an urgency to be love and to share love. And if we answer that call, we can be a community that bridges the spiritual chasm that has come to separate religion and spirituality. And what a wonderful community this will be!

Pastoral Prayer

[Beginning with a short prayer from Walter Brueggemann] Free us, Lord, from our obsession with ourselves long enough to care for others; to be so concerned about the well-being of the human community that we don't have to worry about our place, our church, our class, our values, our vested interests. Help us to know the joy and freedom of putting all Our trust in you.[2]

Creating God, again we thank you for creating us in your image. In this hour of worship remind us that your image is not captured fully in solitary individuals but also and necessarily in human community. In some astounding way, our relationships with others reflects our relationship with you.

As we seek to live faithfully as humans created in your image, open our eyes, our minds, and our hearts to see you in all our relationships. May your presence, lived out through us—individually and as a community of faith—shape our community, so that we might become more like you each day, and that in our relationships, you kingdom will come, your will will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

[2] Walter Brueggemann, *A Way Other Than Our Own: Devotions for Lent*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2017, p.7.

Invitation to the Table

Consider this idea adapted from Richard Rohr:

"We operate under an assumption that new ideas change people. They don't. Believing ideas, in fact, become a way of not having to change in any significant way, especially if you can argue about them. Ideas become defenses.

If you have the right words, you're considered an orthodox, law-abiding Christian. We burned people at the stake for not having the right words, but never to my knowledge for failing to love or forgive, or to care for the poor. Religion has had a love affair with correct words and right ideas, whereas Jesus loved people, who are always imperfect.

You do not have to substantially change to think new ideas. You always have to change to love and forgive ordinary people. We love any religion that asks us to change other people. We avoid any religion that keeps telling us to change. [3]

In that spirit, I invite you to come to this table and prayerfully reflect upon your current plans for cooperating with the transforming love of Christ in your own life. Are you preparing to become better insulated from deep personal change or are you exposing yourself even more to the cries of those whom Christ wants to reach - even if means change for you and/or for us.

[3] Adapted from How Men Change: A Thin Time.