

Leading Causes of Life
1) Healing Power: Connection
Deuteronomy 30:19-20, Mark 3:1-5
August 30, 2009

Last week I called my doctor's office in a very simple quest for one piece of paper. I dialed the number and heard the typical pre-recorded message. "If this is a life-threatening emergency, please hang up and dial 911. If you are a physician or hospital or nursing home, press 8. If you know your party's extension, you may dial it at any time. (How I wish I knew the extension!) For all other matters, please listen closely to the following choices, as our options have changed." (These offices must have lots of extra time on their hands because they seem to change their options daily, although they always sound the same to me!)

The recording went on: "If you want an appointment or to speak to a receptionist, press 1. To refill a prescription, press 3. If this is about life insurance or a medical record, press 4. If you need our address, phone, or FAX, press 5. If you have a question about billing, please call another number. If you wish to leave a non-urgent message for a specific provider, please press 6." Finally, we got to what I wanted! I listened carefully to the list of physicians until mine was named. I pressed the number. Another recording said, "This is the voice mail of Dr. X. It is checked infrequently. It is best to send an email or dial the original number you started with and ask to talk to a receptionist." So much for making a personal connection, even with a healing professional! To complete the story, I did send an email and got a return phone call within 10 minutes!!

Health care, the quality of life, and dodging death are much on our minds these days and in the national conversation. Early in the summer I came across a book whose title was very intriguing, *Leading Causes of Life*.ⁱ We've often heard talk of the leading causes of death, but have we ever considered the leading causes of life? The book invites us to change our perspective. Instead of focusing on avoiding death, concentrate instead on generating life. Life creates; death destroys.

The authors suggest five factors that contribute to healthy social life. They are connection, coherence, agency, blessing, and hope. Focusing on the leading causes of life generates more life and improves the quality of life. Through the month of September we will explore these causes so that we might consciously enhance our own lives as well as the lives of others.

Today we focus on connection. In the phone call I made to connect with my doctor, although it took me a while to get through, I did finally make the connection. Sometimes the essential and meaningful connections in our lives get jammed with unnecessary stuff. We need clarity to get back to our priorities.

Sometimes our connections to people and to God become weak because we focus our attention in other areas.

Science confirms the human need for connection. We are social creatures, uniquely adapted among all creatures for complex relationships. Human life thrives on our social connections to each other. In fact, “our minds seem to be designed for the task of recognizing, initiating, managing, and responding to this dense fabric of highly complex social relationships...Scientists...have figured out that the human brain can recognize the face of someone it has met among thousands of non-familiar faces in less than a quarter of a second.”ⁱⁱ Even our brains are designed for human connection.

Dr. David Wright of Memphis realizes the importance of human connection for health and healing. Many of us approach medical appointments with fear and trepidation. Even in a routine physical, a test may show an underlying problem. It took me two days to consciously remember to request that test order from my doctor’s office! Aware of this fear, Dr. Wright begins his appointments with patients by saying, “Tell me about your family.” If someone responds, “Well my dad lived to an old age, but I don’t know what he died of,” that indicates one thing. If they say, “Oh, let me tell you about my granddaughter,” that tells something else. Another way to discern their personal connections is to see if a family member comes with them when they are seriously ill.

For Dr. Wright, “healing happens best when it is dense with connections—patient and physician, patient and congregation or friends and family, patient with self and patient with God. Patients who are connected survive medical setbacks that would shatter those who are isolated and lonely. Connection has healing power.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In his healing ministry Jesus understood the importance of social connection and the isolation of illness. In the ancient world an illness disrupted social networks, cutting people off from meaningful and life-giving relationships. As important as a physical remedy was a social healing which restored people to their proper place in community. In Mark’s gospel, the man with the withered hand would have been physically capable of participating in the community, but the social norms excluded him because of his disability. Jesus considered it vital that this man be restored to the community of faith and to the social networks which had shunned him. Jesus offered his healing power even in the face of conflict. His priority was giving life, restoring the man to meaningful relationships. There is healing power in the connections we have with God and with one another.

Connection is a leading cause of life. Through our human relationships we find kindness, tenderness, play, delight, and encouragement. Connections happen on an intimate level in our family units, but it is also essential to have friendships

and other networks such as neighborhoods and congregations to nurture our need for relationships.

We have been pleasantly surprised and yet deeply saddened by the discovery of Jaycee Dugard, kidnapped in South Lake Tahoe 19 years ago at the age of 11 and found last week, having been a virtual prisoner in her captors' Antioch backyard for 19 years. She and the children she bore in captivity were cut off from any healthy human connections. We grieve for the lives of meaning which have been denied them, for the family relationships, education, health care, and social connections of which they have been deprived. Humans are designed for connections with one another. We cannot know life in its fullness without relationships.

The Search Institute has identified 40 positive experiences and qualities that young people need in order to grow up healthy and responsible. These qualities are called developmental assets. Of the forty assets, eleven of them directly focus on human connections, including family support, other adult relationships, caring neighborhood, caring school climate, parent involvement in schooling, a community that values youth, adult role models, positive peer influence, creative activities, youth programs, and a religious community. In addition to their parents, young people need support from three or more nonparent adults.^{iv} It takes a village to raise healthy wholesome children. None of us can do it alone. Even in a church a staff member dedicated solely to youth ministry cannot single-handedly provide the connections needed by the youth. The gifts, talents, prayers, presence, greetings, and service of the entire community of faith are necessary.

Last Sunday my son told me that one of you noticed that he had been gone for a few Sundays and you let him know that he had been missed. One of our "church grandmas" shares his love of the theater and frequently inquires about the plays he is rehearsing. These seemingly simple gestures make a huge difference in the lives of our young people. These connections are life-giving and healing.

Just as important as our connection to other human beings is our connection to the Creator of Life, the One who designed us for relationship. In Deuteronomy we heard an excerpt from Moses' farewell message. He reminded the people of Israel of the challenges they had faced. They stood on the brink of a new opportunity, a new juncture in their national history. Moses encouraged them to seize the possibilities of a new beginning by choosing the things that make for life. He urged them to renew their loyalty to the covenant with God as a means of choosing life over death, blessing over curse. Moses realized that the spiritual connection to God is essential for the well-being of the human community.

The word "religion" means "to bind back." It shares a common root with the word "ligament," which is a tough band of tissue holding our bones in place.

The purpose of religion is to bind us back to the Source of Life from which we sprang. John Wesley taught that one of the primary rules of the Christian life is to stay in love with God through the spiritual practices of worship, reading the scriptures, holy communion, prayer, and holy friendship. These are the “ligaments,” if you will, that bind us to God and keep us in love with God.

We are here today because we recognize the necessity of a connection to the Divine Creator. We realize the importance of maintaining that divine connection in the context of a community of faith holds us accountable to our covenant relationship with God. The rituals of singing and prayer sustain our spiritual lives. The reading and interpretation of scripture remind us how God is active and present in our lives. Here we share our lives with friends in the faith who challenge and support, encouraging us to grow deeper.

Gregory Jones describes the difference the community of faith makes: “Holy friends are those people who challenge the sins we have come to love—they know us well enough to see the sins that mark our lives. It isn’t difficult to find people who will talk with us about sins we already hate. But the sins that we love we tend to hide from others and even from ourselves. This is why we need other people to hold us accountable.

“Holy friends also help us discern God’s work in our lives and affirm gifts that we are afraid to claim. They help us to dream God’s dreams in ways we otherwise never would have....Holy friends point us to new avenues of relationship and activity that can enable us to grow in relationship to God and others—and thereby also to discover the selves God calls us to be.”^v

Connections have a healing power. We are made for relationship with God and with one another. Life is diminished when we are isolated. Life is greatly enhanced when we are linked to God and to others in meaningful bonds of unity.

Let us take stock of the meaningful connections in our lives. How strong are they? Are there enough of them? Are they life-giving or draining? Does something need to change in order to strengthen our bond to others? How strong is our connection to the Creator? What practices might help us strengthen that relationship? Do we have a holy friend who helps us discern the presence and call of God in our lives? If not, consider joining a small group at church this fall.

Pastor Larry Pray served a rural community in Minnesota. He asked permission of the local sheriff to transport and supervise prisoners who wished to attend church on Sunday morning. One morning Larry picked up a man whose wife had just given birth to their son. She was driving all the way from Minneapolis—at least a four hour drive—to attend church that morning. This was important because Minnesota law prohibited him from holding his son while he

was in the jail. The young man sat in the front pew of that church. A young woman holding a newborn baby entered and sat down at the back.

At the time of the children's message, to Larry's surprise the young prisoner came forward with the children and sat on the floor with them. Then the mother came forward and gingerly gave the baby to his father to hold and cradle for the first time. You didn't have to know anything about the young man to sense that this was a holy moment of connection that gave life to all who were present.^{vi}

May our lives be blest by holy connections to one another and to our God.

ⁱ Gary Gunderson with Larry Pray, *Leading Causes of Life: Five Fundamentals to Change the Way You Live Your Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009).

ⁱⁱ Ibid, pp. 65-67.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, pp. 69-70.

^{iv} Search Institute, Minneapolis, MN, www.search-institute.org.

^v L. Gregory Jones, "Friends," *Christian Century*, June 27, 2006, p. 31.

^{vi} Gunderson, *ibid*, pp. 84-85.

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