

“Invisible Horizontal and Vertical Connections”

Using the book “The Invisible String” by Patrice Karst

I Corinthians 12: 12-13, 26

John 14: 25 – 27

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All throughout the week, as I held both ‘The Invisible String’ message and sermon in both head and heart, a visual kept interrupting my process. So I thought I’d put it out there at the beginning. What if we were to be connected with each other by a ball of invisible string? I would hold the end in my hand and throw the ball to (someone in pews). She would then catch it and throw it to... (she names a name), who would catch it and then throw it to.... (she/he names a name) until finally we would all be connected in this great, web of invisible string. Even as small as we are, passing the ball from one person to the other would take awhile. And some of us would drop it and have it roll under the pew and we’d have to chase it down the aisle. And ultimately, in the end, we would be one tangled mess, the deacons would be tripping and spilling the plates and juice and then how would we get out the door after the service and well, you see the problem. So let’s sit for just a moment, allow our eyes to see each other and our hearts to allow that connection, an invisible string, allowing ourselves a moment to soak in that truth that ‘you are not alone’. That ‘no one is ever alone’.

In the inside flap of the book “The Invisible String” are these words:

‘The Invisible String is a simple story that reminds children and adults they are never truly alone. As the mother in the story explains, “People who love each other are always connected by a very special String made of love....it delivers a compelling message in today’s uncertain times (copyright 2000 but applies today as well) for grownups and children everywhere who are looking for reassurance and reaffirmation of the transcendent power of love.

The words of the apostle Paul, in his letter to the church in Corinth reminds us of that connection with each other; one body, with a beautiful diversity of members, not one more important than the other. Many members, forming one body united by the Spirit. If one member suffers, all feel that tug on that invisible string and suffer, if one member rejoices, all feel that reverberation of joy running through that which connects them. One body of Christ and individually members of it, with this invisible string Spirit connection.

That Spirit connection found in the very beginning.... ‘in the beginning when God created the heaven’s and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters; a wind from God; God’s breath in Hebrew - ruah, Spirit, swept over the waters of chaos and brought calm, swept over the darkness bringing light.

Centuries later, the one we call the Prince of Peace, the Emmanuel, ‘God with us’, stood before his frightened disciples. He had just told them he was going to be leaving, ‘little children, I am with you only a little longer...Where I am going you cannot follow’. And can’t you almost hear the same words from the disciples that were spoken by little Jeremy to his mother in our story today? “We want to stay close to you. We’re scared!”

And Jesus gave them a promise: ‘I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. If you love me, you will feel my love. I am sending an Advocate, the Holy Spirit, that will keep us connected and remind you of all that I have said and taught.

‘You are not alone.’

Just as the Invisible String is a simple story that reminds children and adults they are never truly alone, can’t we say the same about our faith story, that when you get right down to it, to its essence, this is our story, this is our song, that we are never truly alone for we there is this Holy Spirit invisible bond that connects us to each other and to God.

This is our story, this is our song, that we are never alone for we are always connected. And that connection is both vertical and horizontal. We in the Christian community have the cross to symbolize just that. The vertical line of the cross connects us to God. The horizontal line connects us to each other. Both lines, the vertical love of and for God and the horizontal line for each other form our faith story. ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all of your being, and love your neighbor as yourself.’ ‘Peter, do you love me? Then feed my sheep’ Love one another. We have these invisible horizontal and vertical connections, to God and to each other; each important. Both form the symbol of our faith. Without one or the other, all we have is a big stick.

This is our story, that we are never alone. Why does this matter? Here and now, why does this story matter?

I read recently that this is the question that millennials want answered by the church. Not **what** or **who** to believe, they want to figure that out themselves. Not **how**, for that takes away the mystery. But *why is this important to my life and the world now?* Any millennials out there? (Definition, those born in the late 80s or 90s or beginnings of 2000s.) Thank you for the why question, for the honesty of the why question because after all, it gets at the heart of all of our questioning.

You are not alone. No one is ever alone. Why does this matter?

Well, for each of us personally, that feeling of being alone enters at an early age and returns so very often in life. At each life’s transition; from the first day of preschool, to moving out on ‘our own’, to the absence felt by the death of a loved one or the end of a relationship...so many alone times; those times when we are finding ourselves and even feel alone in a crowd; having that connection, that faith story Spirit connection, that although we cannot see it, we are connected always with God, a connection lived out by our connection to each other, can be life saving.

Why does it matter?

Last week at the our daughter’s freshman convocation at the University of Cincinnati, the President of the University, Neville Pinto shared with incoming students and parents a word that has become of utmost importance to him, a word that he wants to engrain in each student at the

university. That word, and more importantly, the characteristic of the word, is 'empathy'. In his speech he said that research shows that over the last forty years, we as a society have become less empathetic. Less able or willing to feel connected with one another, to listen to one another, to stand in another's shoes. Interesting that for all of our social media ways of connecting, we are losing more and more that deep bond we have with each other. I don't know the research, but I do think it's something to reflect on, whether we agree with the outcome or not.

Why does this connection matter?

A story: There is a teacher in an elementary school who has developed a routine every Friday. Each Friday, she has her students individually answer a set of questions on a piece of paper. 'Who did you sit by this week?' 'Who do you want to sit by next week?' 'Who is your friend?' 'Who wants to sit by you?' Then over the weekend she takes these pieces of paper and studies them. The end goal is not to come up with a new seating chart, which she does for the following week. The end goal is to see which kids are being left out, not readily included, or sometimes overtly excluded. She started doing this after the mass shooting at Columbine High School. For she knows that those boys, and so many of the boys to come who have become infamous, often share one commonality; they were loners, they did not have a strong invisible string connection to either peers or family or faith community. Connection matters.

In the gospel of John, the disciples, which includes us, are given bad news and good news. The bad news is that Jesus is going away. The Good news is that God is sending the Holy Spirit to connect the Body of Christ, to empower us to be the work of love in the world.

And so, you are the Body of Christ, individually members of one Body, connected by the Spirit with an invisible thread of love to God and to each other. No one is ever alone. I would like to invite you to turn to a neighbor in the pews, if you are kids and parents sitting together, then parents, turn to your kids and speak these words, then kids, turn to your parents and with sincerity speak these same words, "You are not alone."

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us, reminding us that we are never alone. May we here and now and all of our days renew our sense of connection with each other and with You.

Amen