

I. Advanced Organizer

- A. Mary Poppins. Favorite movie as a child; now one of my kids. "Spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down."
- B. Gospel is supposed to be Good News. Is that Good News with an Asterisk? Is it a spoonful of sugar? Or does that really mean that there is No Bad News in connecting with God? If so, how can that be?
- C. Important question because a lot of us feel like connecting with God brings some definite down sides.
 - 1. Will I have to give up things I enjoy
 - 2. Will I be able to do things my way? I like to sleep in on Sundays. I like to stay home and watch TV, not go to small group. Maybe I have some habits that Jesus might not be a fan of I might have to reconsider.
 - 3. Downer to have someone looking over my shoulder judging me all the time. Santa Clause. Watching for a misstep. Ready to zap me.
 - 4. Connecting to God is a "should" not a source of life.
 - 5. And yet, the mission and purpose of Jesus is consistently called Good News by the early church. So what are we missing if we have the bad news experience?
- D. Jesus talked to his closest followers a lot about what he was about and where it was all going the night before he died. Lots of important content in later chapters of John that tell the story of that night.
 - 1. Includes the text we are going to look at today.

II. John 15: 5-17

5 I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing. 6 Anyone who does not remain in me is thrown away like a useless branch and withers. Such branches are gathered into a pile to be burned. 7 But if you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask for anything you want, and it will be granted! 8 When you produce much fruit, you are my true disciples. This brings great glory to my Father.

9 "I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love. 10 When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father's commandments and remain in his love. 11 I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow! 12 This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. 13 There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command. 15 I no longer call you slaves, because a master doesn't confide in his slaves. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me. 16 You didn't choose me. I chose you. I appointed you to go and produce lasting fruit, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask for, using my name. 17 This is my command: Love each other.

A. Connection to Jesus brings fruitfulness.

- 1. Those who "remain in him", who stay connected bear fruit, just by being connected.
- 2. We are like branches. Our connection to the vine causes the fruitfulness; not anything in ourselves. **The vine does the work.** The vine brings the nutrients. All the branches need to do to be fruitful is stay connected. "Remain" in the vine. Connection is the heart of it all. Not what we can do. Not how well we behave. **It's our connection to the vine that brings fruitfulness.**

3. **Disconnection from the vine is the opposite: fruitless.** Unproductive. If disconnected, it doesn't matter how much the branch works; it's not gonna bear fruit. "Apart from me you can do nothing". Can't make it happen on it's own. Gonna shrivel up.

a) **Everything depends on staying connected.**

b) only bad thing is getting disconnected. Only judgement is disconnection.

4. **Disconnection from God leads to disconnection from everything else.** - Disconnection from other branches. The branch on the ground is alone. Also, for the self - disconnection from fruitfulness - living a life of purpose and meaning.

B. Connection to Jesus brings overflowing joy.

1. Different from the fear we talked about before - completely happy, satisfied, not angry or sad.

a) Obey me and you'll have complete joy.

2. Jesus seems to want his followers to be filled with joy. That those who are truly connected should experience deep satisfaction.
3. Good indication of whether you're really connected - how is your joy level? Are you filled with joy? Looking around, are most of the folks you know, filled with joy? What does that mean? Just happiness or something deeper?

4. **American culture has it's own prescription for happiness.**

a) My friend Charles was born in Korea and was sent to US at a young age to pursue opportunities here. Charles observed this about American culture through movies, tv, etc. Everything seemed to be about two different messages:

(1) **being a good person.** Moral person. Making the right choices. Being a good guy vs a bad guy. Black and white.

(2) **Being a successful person.** Succeeding in whatever endeavor you do. Be a superhero. Go to the best school. Be top of the class. Being the best at your job. Succeeding in finding the right life partner. Having a successful life that allows you to buy a house, a nice car, send your kids to a great college. Ultimately, you become powerful when you're successful. You can control your life. Meritocracy. Rise based on your hard work and your talent. Great things will happen.

(3) **Culture says this is what life is about.** Very tempting to live in pursuit of these things to make us happy. But the problem is, there seem to be some downsides to these paths to a satisfactory life. If anything, it seems that the **pursuit of these things alone lead not to joy, lead not to happiness but they can lead to disillusionment, cynicism, even despair.**

(4) **We try to be good and yet we get bested by the folks who don't play by the rules.** The cheaters seem to be winning. We seem to get punished for following rules. **Or we find we can't follow them well enough.** Find ourselves weighed down by the "shoulds". Controlled by the evaluation of right vs. wrong. Far from living in joy, we're **ruled by anxiety.**

(5) And what about "success"? **What happens when we pursue the thing that we're told will make us happy and it comes up short?** We get the job and it gets old quickly. We get the marriage but its not happily ever after. The baby we were supposed to want won't sleep through the night. Even the money might buy us stuff, including stuff we like, but it also create a kind of cynicism because it doesn't really take away the feeling of dissatisfaction. And once we lose the belief that we can just succeed our way to happiness what are we left with?

b) Perhaps morality and success are not the path to joy.

- c) Jesus is saying connection to the vine, connection to him, that's the way to satisfaction and joy. What does that look like?

C. Connection to Jesus comes through self-giving love.

1. Three statements from Jesus make this clear.
 - a) You remain in me by following my commandments. (vs. 10)
 - (1) Not a bunch of rules and regulations; not about morality; being a good person
 - b) My commandment is love one another, in the same way that I have loved you. (vs. 12)
 - (1) This is a statement Jesus makes over and over. "love one another". "Love your neighbor and love yourself." "I command you: love". But then he goes further to help us understand what he means.
 - c) No greater love than laying down one's life for one's friends. (vs. 13) This is self-giving love. This is the way of the cross.
 - d) These words are coming less than 48 hours before Jesus will endure the cross. He is interpreting in advance what he is about to do. **He's about to give himself in love and he needs his friends to understand that, both so they can receive the self-giving love, and they can do the same.**
2. **The way of the cross is not the way of morality or the way of success. It's actually counter to those. Stands against them.**
 - a) **Jesus let go of his right to godhood and became human.** He laid down the privilege of his divinity to become human.
 - b) Jesus became the perfect human. **He was the only one who actually managed to live a sinless life.** He perfectly fulfilled every moral obligation.
 - c) **If the myth of moral perfection leads to success is true, by rights Jesus should have been an earthly king.** He should have been given power and blessing and honor in his earthly life. But that's not the story of the cross.
 - d) **Jesus didn't take power to himself.** He didn't take on human might. Just the opposite. In the early days of his ministry, Jesus went into the desert there and he encountered temptation. His enemy, the embodiment of evil came and said, "I will give you all the kingdoms of the world." I will give you ultimate power. **You can do anything. You will be the most successful human being imaginable. All you have to do is...bow down and worship me.** Don't worship yahweh; worship power. And Jesus looked that devil in the face and said "Hell no". He turned and went another way. He chose submission to the injustice of evil. He knew in so many ways it was wrong. He chose defeat. Jesus purposefully took on the opposite of power and success. **He went from total power to total powerlessness willingly.**
 - e) He took on rejection. He took on isolation. He took on betrayal. And ultimately he took on horrific death. **Horrible things happened to the best human who ever lived** - it's a scandal to our sense of justice. Totally offends what we believe about the world.
 - (a) **Perhaps this is why Islam doesn't believe Jesus died on the cross.**

Generally Islam teaches that Jesus was crucified, but God took him up and put someone else there that looked like Jesus at the end. He didn't actually die. Unconscionable that a good and just God could allow a person like Jesus, a holy prophet, to die such an unjust, demeaning death. It could not have happened.
 - f) **But we, as Christians, believe Jesus actually died.** Yes, we believe he rose, but first he had to die. Why? Because we live in a world where you don't just do the right thing and everything goes well. We live in a world where really bad things happen to really good people. We live in a world where justice does not rule the day. And rather than abandon the unjust, rather than abandon the vulnerable to the isolation of rejection, of

pain, of tragedy, Jesus steps in. Jesus himself becomes a victim of injustice and in so doing, Jesus joins the ranks of every person who has ever been made vulnerable by another. Jesus shows solidarity with those who do everything right, and still have their homes wiped out in Haiti. Still thrown in prison for a crime they didn't commit. Targeted for color of their skin. **Jesus chooses loss so that no one need suffer alone, however devastating the loss. Jesus chooses connection.**

- g) **At the heart of the gospel, the good news of Jesus, is the cross. And the heart of the cross is connection.** And it's not just the vulnerable and disempowered who Jesus connects with. As he dies he says a profound thing, and he says it about some surprising people. **He speaks of the very people who are buying the lies of the mob, the lies of culture,** buying the BS that might makes right, or the BS that religious purity justifies violence, they are buying this crap and with it they are justifying the crucifixion of a completely innocent man. **And Jesus calls out to God and says, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they're doing."**
 - h) The cross introduced something in it that made a way for all of humanity to connect with God. Not just the disempowered, but all of us **for whether we have privilege or not, none of us can live perfection.** All of us make choices that harm ourselves, harm others, harm our relationships, and yet as Jesus was being harmed, he forgives. And **he invites all who can accept this extension of self-giving love to do so. Because it is about connection.**
 - i) **Jesus wanted people to be a part of the vine.** To experience connection, and **freedom from shame,** so that our mistakes are not what disqualify us, but are **invitations to grow in connection as we name our weaknesses, and accept mercy, and learn to do better.** The cross reminds us that God loves us, even when we don't do things well. The cross brings that which is not earned, but allows us to move past beating ourselves up for that which we can't do well enough. We could never earn our way to divinity. Not through holiness. Not through success. The only way to real connection with God, with ourselves, and with others **is the way of love, demonstrated through the self-giving love shown on the cross.**
3. **Cross as connection redefines how we understand everything about what Jesus taught.** It was all about connection.
- a) Jesus had some **important things to say about how we live.** It wasn't a "just do what you feel like" ethic. Jesus understood that our actions had implications. The most important one for him was did they bring connection or separation.
 - (1) **Paul Tillich, theologian - sin is separation.**
 - (2) So no...we don't lie, cheat, steal. not because they're morally wrong. **Because they bring disconnection. They bring separation.**
 - b) Look at how Paul spoke about the way that being in Jesus changes how we live. (Ephesians 4)
"25 Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. 26 "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, 27 and do not give the devil a foothold. 28 Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need."
 - (1) All about connection. Sin is what disconnects us. It's not about what's right and wrong in a black and white way. It's about what brings connection.

- (2) Don't lie because we're members of one body. We don't want to break trust. The body parts need to work together.
 - (3) Don't stay angry. Work it out so you can stay connected.
 - (4) Don't steal, because you're taking something from someone else. Rather work so you can give. So you foster connection rather than breaking it.
 - c) This shows us it's more about the principle than the rules. Sin is what introduces disconnection. Think about other things Jesus teaches. In the sermon on the mount he says this:
 - (1) **"38 'You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' 39 But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. 40 And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. 41 If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. 42 Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.'"**
 - d) Turn the other cheek. About breaking the cycle of vengeance. Not relying on the need to take justice into our own hands. Rather, Jesus says, if someone strikes you, don't fight back. Turn the other cheek. This could be an opportunity for connection. To give them what they don't deserve. To show love instead of reflect hate with hate. To say like Michelle Obama, when you go low, I go high. There can be a power in that. That can bring connection. Can convict the heart.
 - (a) But it's not a law of morality. It's a framework for connection. It doesn't fit every situation. When you're being abused, when you keep being hit again and again, Jesus is not saying, keep turning the other cheek. Because in that instance, it won't bring connection. The abuser is expecting you to take it. Walking away, saying, I won't do this anymore, this abuse is furthering disconnection between us, it's disconnecting me from my true self and you from your true self, and until you can see that and change course, I need to make it stop - that might actually be the path to connection at that point. It connects the person to truth. It calls the person to repentance. Repentance is a call to turn from separation and choose connection.
- D. **This is not all just theoretical for me.** Jesus' way of connection is more than theoretical. The truth is that **life is hard. Life has in it a lot of bad news.** This week has been a reminder of that for me personally on multiple levels.
1. Start with the most recent. As I'm sure you all know, **late Friday a tape of audio of Donald Trump** was leaked, in which he was speaking in horrendous ways about women.
 - a) It's more than just that the language he was using was sexually explicit. It's that he was speaking about **sexual assault**.
 - b) **I am a survivor of sexual assault.** Sexual assault when I was a child, and as a young adult. In all cases, this was BAD NEWS.
 - (1) These experiences only **reinforced the message I was getting from so many other place.** Our culture teaches a woman is something to do something to sexually. Not a person with agency of her own. My value was ultimately in my sexual desirability to men.
 - (2) Led to believing **my value was in my dress size.** Led to eating disorders. Self loathing. Fear of men.
 - (3) **Connecting with Jesus was only Good News.** Brought a new way of regarding myself. Brought a way of experience acceptance for all that I am. Brought celebration of myself as woman as fearfully and wonderfully made by God. Brought

affirmation of my dignity as a woman. Brought connection to the gifts I had within me, given by God. Brought connection to the community in which those gifts could be nurtured.

- c) **Still, since these revelations, I've found myself feeling less safe in the world.** Had to ask my husband, who has always been nothing but supportive, loving, affirming and empowering of me, not to flirt with me because it triggers negative resonances. And **it's not really Trump that leaves me feeling unstable.** It's the fact that anyone at all is defending him. Anyone is trying to dismiss this as "what guys do". I was on the treadmill listening to CNN yesterday, as Trump was bragging about all the support he was getting. This makes my blood boil.

(1) **Because as long as any of us, male or female, stand by and downplay this toxic masculinity, this blatant aggressive misogyny, we only further the power of disconnection that objectification of women, rape culture, toxic masculinity reinforce.** The way of the cross stands against those things that would disconnect us or others. The way of the cross demands we lay down dominance over another, we lay down oppression of the other, we confess where we have participated in or perpetuated oppression, and we look for ways to help those who've been hurt become safely connected to their proper sense of self, connected to community, connected to God again. **That's how Jesus is good news.**

2. There's another item in the news this week; it involves someone in our own community. **Theological Purge at InterVarsity.** Staff who support gay marriage suffering "involuntary termination". As I watch staff have to wrestle with the sad reality of leaving their careers, leaving their calls to ministry, leaving their sources of funding as a difficult matter of conscience, I resonate. Three years ago, I experienced something very similar. A Theological Purge too. **This was bad news for me.** It's bad news for these staff in InterVarsity. Honestly, I think it's bad news all around.

- a) But it's not surprising. **I believe that just as Trump's propensity to dominate others is linked to the myth of power and success, Intervarsity Purge is linked to the myth that our morality can save us.** If we can just read our Bible correctly, think the right thoughts, interpret things the right way, stand, even when it's unpopular, for the right things, we can know that we are right before God. But this depends on a level of certainty that we would do well to be careful of, when speaking of the Divine. And it masks the truth that God speaks from the margins. That God says things that are beyond our capacity to understand. That other who are part of our family may hold other views with conscientiousness before God; they may even reflect God's heart more than our own. It masks the truth that we don't worship a set of documents written thousands of years ago and interpreted in certain ways, we worship a living God who is still alive and moving, and growing us, and doing new things in our world, and often speaking through the voices on the margins. It masks the truth that when we silence those voices, we may be participating in the silencing of Jesus himself. This is a dangerous proposition.

- b) But there's hope. **Connecting with Jesus saved me, even through my trauma in the church.** It turns out the vine is bigger than the church, at least any particular expression of it. Thank God! It was my connection with Jesus that met me in my places of death, and gave me hope for resurrection. It was through my connection to Jesus that I had hope for new partnerships and a new kind of community. And ultimately, it was through my connection to Jesus that this community was formed. And it's such an honor. **The way of Jesus is good news, even in surprising circumstances.**

3. But my history, as a survivor of theological purge, as a survivor of sexual assault, compels me to speak in the face of these things that would seek to disconnect us.
 - a) **I sincerely believe that racial hierarchy that would favor some people over others because of their race, toxic masculinity that would define manhood through the dominance of womanhood, and exclusionary theological certainty that would expel any voices of dissonance, and the lust for political power at all cost - these are among the demons of our day. Strong language that I do not use lightly.** These are evil personified in our time. These are **the forces operating to further disconnection**. For those of us who are following Jesus we must say **a clear and strong no to these forces and yes to something else**. We must cast these demons out. And we say **Yes to being people who follow the way of self giving love**.
4. Jesus is calling his followers to be people who are about what he is about - **connection**. Lovers of others. Initiators of re-connection. Makers of community. This is why joy is promised. Joy doesn't come from "success". It doesn't come from doing everything right. It comes from connection. Following the way of cross bears same fruit - bring forgiveness, connection. Inspire community. To help folks experience the truly good news of Jesus.
- E. So yes, I believe there are places in life where you're expected to swallow some sugar to drink down the medicine, where you're expected to swallow sanitized crap even, **but Jesus is not that way**. I believe that we get to thrive connected to the vine. That our joy becomes complete when we remain connected. That we experience fruitfulness in relationships, we bear the fruit of meaningful connections to ourselves, meaningful connections to those around us, meaning fun connections to Jesus himself, and those connections bring vitality, and freshness and potency that flavor our life for better. I believe those connections are what life is really about. And thus **I believe with all my heart that there's no bad news in connecting with Jesus**. Amen.