

SERMON: Sunday, May 25, 2025

Sermon Title: “A Rhythm of Life: Can You Relate?”

A rhythm of life. How would you describe yours? What helps shape it? If you currently work outside the home, or have children in school, your life's rhythms get shaped by those institutions you are engaged in at this stage of life. And for many of you that are retired, well ... you have other commitments in this season of life: charitable organizations and church committees, family events and even doctor's appointments (!) – that shape your schedule, and as a result shape your rhythm of life.

In May, we started exploring what it takes to create a spiritual rhythm of life, and the spiritual practices that support it. Using Ken Shigamatsu's image of a plant growing up on a trellis¹, we looked first at the foundation of our spiritual life, the strong roots that start our growth through intentional Sabbath with God, and time steeped in the gift of God's Word. We also look at nourishing our developing relationship with God through prayer. Today, we'll continue our look at our spiritual life as it grows further, and how relationships are part of the trellis that guides it. Listen again to scripture as we contemplate the practice of relationship in our journey to growing in our relationship with God, through the words of ...

Sermon Text John 13:31-35 (NRSV)

31 When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in (the Son of Man). 32 If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. 33 Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’

34 I give you a new commandment, *that you love one another*. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Holy Wisdom, Holy Word. **Thanks be to God!**

I took guardianship of a nephew during the middle of his high school years. As he was transitioning to a new community and a new school, he began to share how many new “friends” he had. And from my generational perspective, I was picturing those high school students he was sitting next to daily on the bus, eating

¹ Ken Shigamatsu, *God in My Everything: How an Ancient Rhythm Helps Busy People Enjoy God* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2013)

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lunch with, partnering up with on class assignments. But – I soon learned that this wasn't his frame of reference. He finally shared that most of the individuals he called friends had taken on that label by accepting a "friend request" on Facebook with a quick click of a button. And as a result, he was only learning about these young people through a carefully curated view of their lives – funny cartoons and images that reflected what they were interested in; posting statements from other people instead of writing their points of view; pictures of some of the events and people they came across in their daily life that highlighted the best of their world. Commenting on someone's post was their preferred form of conversation, and accepting what was seen on screen in the cyberworld became the way they thought they got to know someone. Later in his school year, as he garnered more information about these people through sources other than social media, the shine fell off of many of these people he assumed had perfect lives. With time, he learned their lives also had difficult aspects to them, different from his challenges but still soul rocking. And he began to reach out to a few of them in a new way, helping them feel seen. Over time, a few of these individuals became in-person friends – and the character and quality of the relationship changed. He volunteered it was much more fulfilling, and began letting go (a little) of the accumulation of friend numbers.

The issue of the quality of relationships is one that is often talked or written about in this new world we live in. Social media helps us keep connected when life doesn't allow us to be in the same physical space. Our worshipers in our cyber-pews can attest to that. But life lived only online is missing something. I read a story by a journalist for New Yorker Magazine who decided to throw a party for all of the friends he had accumulated through social media. He put out an event invite to the seven hundred "friends" he had on Facebook, to meet up for a get-together at his favorite bar. Of the seven hundred Facebook friends, fifteen said they would be there; sixty others clicked "maybe". That evening: one person showed up – a friend of a friend – and she left within a half hour. He stayed until midnight with no one else showing up. This journalist wrote in the article he penned about his "friend" experience: "Seven hundred friends – and I was drinking alone that night."

Since the pandemic, these cyber relationships have continued as the common way that millennials and Generation Z become acquainted with, and form, relationships. While Facebook has faded into the distance as their primary social media platform, being surpassed by X, Insta, Snapchat, and now TikTok and BeReal, engaging online is their normative process for getting to know someone.

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The growing method for meeting a future spouse has also gone online. But there is still a side to it that continues to create a narrow experience of relationship. A seminary friend of mine who is a millennial was sharing people she had met in NYC during her frequent visits there, and 2-3 times a week they go online and game together. But when I asked her if she met up with them in person for a meal, or a walk in Central Park when she visited the city every 6-8 weeks, she said “no”, they just hadn’t seemed to be able to find a way to meet up. Their relationship was completely in the cyberworld, and unintentionally, or intentionally, they were keeping it that way. So these people she is spending so much time with – I asked if they would be the ones she turned to in a life crisis, in times of extreme difficulty. And she admitted no – she would still turn to friends she had spent more in-person time with. And why? She had experienced from them that their actions matched their words, and trust had built up from that experience. Those are the ones she would walk the difficult moments in life with.

This new way of interacting online is still filling a need in us as human beings. It creates a little connection at times when in-person connection isn’t possible. And that’s important, because we weren’t created to live in isolation, but to be in relationship. Genesis tells us that God saw the created human, and declared “it is not good that the human should be alone.” This has been historically interpreted as a mandate to marriage, but that is a pretty narrow framing of what God intended. Just as God is in relationship through the Trinitarian relationship of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost – the Creator, Christ and Comforter – we who were created in God’s image should also live in relationship with others. And the types of relationships we are part of throughout our lives are as diverse as all of the creation God made. From family, intimate partners and friends through our various activities of life, we walk the spiritual walk to being in relationship with God through our relationships.

Jesus earlier in his ministry boiled down the directives that comprise the law of Moses, which were expanded from the original 10 Commandments, down to two: from Deuteronomy 6:4-5, he cited that the first of all the commandments is to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” He followed that by adding Leviticus 19:18 as the second greatest commandment: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” He is quoted in Matthew as saying that all of the Mosaic law and all of the teaching of the prophets hang on these two commandments. But then, after his last meal with his closest 12 disciples, right after Judas Iscariot leaves the room

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Jesus doesn't just remind his disciples of the repeated elevation of these two ancient commandments. He tells them "I give you a NEW commandment – that you love one another."

How is this different from what Jesus had been saying all along? There are several different ways we can look at this teaching of Jesus. First, it was another way of pointing out that the kingdom of God would look very different from the world the disciples lived in – and that we still live in. Think of the world of the Roman Empire. Jesus' commandment of total and uncompromising love was a radical departure from the values of the Roman emperor and the leaders under him that obtained their positions of power by parroting or complying with Caesar's thoughts and wishes. The Roman Empire didn't build its rule on the love and care for the people under them. People were only valued by the Roman Empire for what they could give to it: people to fill the legions of the Roman army; strong backs and taxes to build temples and palaces, aqueducts and roads for the armies to march along in order to conquer more nations for bragging rights on how big they were. Roman colonialism was the opposite of the kingdom Jesus was painting for those listening to his teaching. Love of others, not love of money and power, was God's kingdom.

The second framework for this new commandment comes out of its placement right after Judas leaves the upper room. Judas' betrayal was less a factor of his revealing where Jesus was going that night – any one of the crowd hanging around Jesus after his triumphant entry into Jerusalem could have spilled the beans about his whereabouts at any given time. No – Judas' betrayal was a betrayal of Jesus' incarnation and God's plan for salvation. Judas never could reconcile Jesus as the "God who has become human, the God who will die." Judas was looking for a strong, decisive human leader that would lead the Jewish people, by force if necessary, to overthrow the Roman government and install a truly Jewish leader over God's people. Judas failed to see God in Jesus – and to accept Jesus' death as part of the plan for the spiritual salvation of the people of Israel. *His rejection of Jesus' divine mission was the key betrayal.* And in the wake of this, and in his imminent death, Jesus knew all of his other disciples would be temporarily lost, at risk of also betraying Jesus' teaching. And so he said to them: love one another. Live in loving relationship. That is how you will continue to see me. You will see me in your actions towards others. Jesus' relationship with his disciples would not end with his death – it would be a transformed relationship. And in Jesus' returning to God the Father, he transformed our relationship with our Creator Father, returning it to one of love.

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There is a clarity to Jesus' teaching at the end of his life as recorded by John. Just like humans facing our own mortality, knowing the end of earthly life is near can lead us to focus on what was most important about our lives – the people we lived around and with, the people we loved. And this is also countercultural to earthly values, property inheritance. To leave a lasting legacy, not of money but of love, is the advice of Jesus. When Jesus announces “love one another as I have loved you,” he is resetting our priorities. As his followers, the disciples were being guided to the one thing that was essential to maintaining a relationship with Jesus – following Jesus' example, they must live a life of loving each other and all people that cross their path in life.

And so the apostle Paul picks up Jesus' new commandment, and fleshes it out for us as members of the body of Christ, the church. After instructing the church in Ephesians verse 4:1, “lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called,” Paul instructs them as the church, and us today, on what a life lived in love looks like. Being careful about letting anger take over. Not letting harsh and cruel things come out of our mouths – we should be speaking words of grace. Putting away actions that come out of bitterness and anger, that lead to speaking stereotypes and slurs that slander others. And then Paul ends with not just telling all of us that call ourselves Christian what not to do, but what to do: *be kind, be tenderhearted, be forgiving*, “forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.”

Paul provides a profound summary of Jesus' commandment: “Therefore, *be imitators of God*, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us”(Eph 5:1) Paul understood clearly what Jesus was teaching: love isn't a noun, a label or descriptor word of a thought or feeling. Christian love should be a verb. / It should describe action. Jesus' new commandment is to do love: taking actions that come out of this loving orientation to the people we live with and around, across this planet, our fellow created beings in the world God placed us to live and work together. Just as Jesus' actions glorified God in his brief life with us, so also our actions glorify God when we live in love; when our actions, not just our words, imitate the Christ that gave us a renewed relationship with God.

The spiritual practice of relationship is part reflection, and part action. Thinking about and adjusting for how we treat each and every created being in our thoughts, words and deeds. And it's not just the people you sit next to here in the pews, that you join in membership within a church, the people in your

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family or just the people you choose to normally do things with. It is intended as an orientation of love towards all of God's created beings. Remember Jesus' teaching? "I say, love your enemies." Who do you consider your enemy, and how do you talk in a loving way to and about them, showing them acts of love? It's not an easy assignment Jesus has given his followers. It's not easy not talking in anger about the person driving like a fool in the Meijer parking lot who hits our parked car. And it's not easy to talk in kind words about people we are told to hate by the media and political figures that use that hate to their advantage, just like the Romans did. It's not easy to act lovingly to all, putting a singular priority on our family relationships with our time and energy and love only going to a select few, ignoring our unloving actions and attitudes towards those outside that inner circle. It's countercultural, just as it was in Jesus' time. It is counter to the values and priorities of the systems and powers of this world. But again: Jesus didn't promise it was easy. He only said, "Follow me," and then showed what that journey looks like. Misunderstanding. Rejection. Punishment. The death of this life. But Jesus lived his human existence with love as a verb. His actions were always a model of love. And imitating Christ, our spiritual practice of relationship should also be constantly working on modeling love in all we say and do.

Most plants grow out of the dark earth, with the root sending shoots reaching up toward the sun when it has been fed and watered. Once it stretches out of the earth, viney plants and tall stalks need something to support them, to guide them upward so that they don't cover fragile new shoots and leaves and choke out the life of the young vine. And so with our spiritual lives. The practice of being in-relationship with all in love is critical to guiding each of our journeys as disciples of Christ, essential to our healthy spiritual formation. We live under a new commandment: to love one another as Jesus' loved. Unconditionally. Expansively. We must do it because we were created in need of others to grow and thrive in this life. Including all we encounter in person or online – there are good and bad examples of love of neighbor also in the cyberworld. In the weeks ahead, reflect on how you use love of neighbor in all you say or do. And, remembering our God of forgiveness, look ahead at ways you can better act out that love towards all of God's created beings. "Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children, *and live in love*, as Christ loved us." May we all live into that aspirational way of acting, of being. Amen.