

*Ancestry.UMC*  
***Living Hope***

We conclude today a short series about our DNA as United Methodists. We're focusing on Francis Asbury, the first bishop and leader of Methodism in America. He was not just an influential Methodist leader. He was one of the most popular people in America in the late 1700's and early 1800's.

Historians say that if a letter was simply addressed to Bishop Francis Asbury, United States of America, it would have gotten to him. There are 13 cities named after Asbury including **Asbury Park, New Jersey, (pic)** the namesake of Bruce Springsteen's first album, *Greetings from Asbury Park*. There is a significant **statue of Asbury** on 16th St. in Washington, DC dedicated by President Calvin Coolidge. One of the descriptions on the statues calls Asbury "The Prophet of the Long Road." **A World War II ship** was named *SS Francis Asbury*. Over 200 congregations in America have Asbury in their name. So Francis Asbury truly kind of a big deal.

As I've mentioned, the themes of these weeks were inspired by a statement from a biography on Francis Asbury's life. It says that in his last days he focused on three things: preaching, collecting for the poor, and visiting old friends. Each was an expression of his faith. Today we consider this last one, visiting old friends.

Our daughter in Denver, Julie, and her family have developed a tradition on Easter of attending the church where her cousin's family are members. She said this year when the pastor invited people to turn and greet each other she turned around and overheard this conversation. A woman greeted a man who was there for the first time. She asked him, "Where are you from?" He said, "I come from a small town in West Virginia you've probably never heard of." She said, "Try me." He told the name of the town and the woman turned to someone and said, "Kate, look here." When Kate saw this man she shouted out pretty loud, "Oh my gosh!" Only she didn't say Gosh.

I'm sure the pastor appreciates people in a worship service shouting God's name, but maybe for different reasons. Anyway, this whole area of the church then grew quiet to see what was going on. It turns out they had gone to high school together and had been good friends but lost touch. They hadn't seen each other since then. Now, here they were in a church in Denver on Easter being reconnected.

Church is meant to connect people.

I think about my own life and how all just about all of the significant relationships in my life happened through church. I met my best friend growing up at a United Methodist Church. I met Susan because of the church. My best man in my wedding was a seminary classmate. Our girls moved here to Indianapolis because of the church. That is what led to them meeting the guys they married. In many ways their own families are because of the church.

The other day I called a guy from a former church. I heard his dad had passed away. He had been my staff-parish chair at one point. He told me he loved me several times in that conversation. This is a guy from the mountains in NC! In fact, he said he watches our worship services. He told me how much he appreciates that there is a church like St. Luke's that is open and inclusive. We ended the conversation and he said again, "I love you my friend."

I understand why Francis Asbury made it a point right up to his death to visit old friends.

Now, you may be thinking, "That's a nice sentiment, but to call it an expression of faith, isn't that a bit much?" But let me remind you how much the New Testament connects our relationship to God to our relationship with each other. Consider some of the things Jesus said:

If you are at the altar and remember someone who has wronged you,

***"go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."***(Mt5:24)

People above faithful practice.

***"As I have loved you, so you must love one another."*** (John 13:34)

***"Love the Lord your God with all your heart...soul...mind...strength...and love your neighbor as yourself."*** (Mk 12:30)

***"If you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you."*** (Mt 6:14)

And the words we considered last week, ***"When you do it to the least of these you do it unto me."***

And then add to that other New Testament verses: ***"Carry each other's burdens and in this way you fulfill the law of Christ."*** (Gal. 6:2)

***"Love is the fulfilment of the law."*** (Rom. 13:10)

***"This is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us."*** (1 Jn 3:23)

***"Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God."***(1 John 4:7)

For much of my life I have thought and even preached the idea that our faith in God makes our relationships with each other stronger. That's how the Christian life works. As our faith grows, our relationships grow. But I don't know that I believe that any more. I've known plenty of Christians who have plenty of faith but don't always love people that well. I've seen it in the church. In fact, I have known Christians whose faith does just the opposite in their relationships. Their faith in God is the reason they

exclude others and sever relationships. Their faith does more to help them not love than it does to love.

So I'm wondering if I've had it backwards. Rather than focusing on our faith first in order to love people better, we should focus on loving people better in order to love God more.

I realize this may be some questionable theology, and perhaps its even heresy. So let me back away from the ledge of apostasy and just say that all these verses from the New Testament seem to be telling us that loving people well, building and maintaining friendships is as spiritual of an activity as reading the Bible and praying. Or at least this means that we experience God through relationships like no other source.

Carver McGriff tells about a woman who came back to church for the first time after her husband died. His funeral was the last time she had been in the sanctuary. She

We need each other to experience God. This is our DNA as United Methodist. Relationship language is at the heart of our vocabulary...Connectional church...Full Connection...Connectional Table.

***United Methodists throughout the world are bound together in a connectional covenant in which we support and hold each other accountable for faithful discipleship and mission...In covenant with God and with each other:***

***--We affirm our unity in Christ...***

***---We commit ourselves to crossing boundaries of language, culture, and social or economic status...***

***--We commit ourselves to full equity and accountability in our relationships...And***

***--We enter afresh into a relationship of mutuality, creating a new sense of community and joyously living out our worldwide connection in our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.***

***The United Methodist Book of Discipline 2016, .125***

This is what we believe as United Methodists, that building community is a sacred responsibility. And this is where God comes in. We can't do that without God's help. We can't love others well without God. We can't keep from giving up on people without God.

Think about our scripture reading for this morning. It comes from Ecclesiastes. It says, two are better than one. If one falls, the other is there to pick you up. Two will keep each other warm in bed. (Now I don't think the writer is talking about every relationship there!) Two will withstand an attack. The emphasis is on twos, pairs. But then notice the last verse, ***"A threefold cord is not quickly broken."*** (Ecclesiastes 4:12)

That analogy stands out because the numbers change. The writer has been talking about twos, now all of a sudden there's the mention of a 3 strands in a cord. Why? Perhaps the

writer is subtly implying the third cord is God. It is God binding the two together. It is God who keeps us strong.

Maybe its not one before the other, that we love God first then people, or love people then God. Maybe it is tandem...