

Session #2: Connected to Bear Good Fruit

Yesterday we spoke of the value of *righteous interruptions* and the three trail markers for a sustainable Wesleyan ecology:

1. **Followers of Jesus are *Forever-Beginning-Disciples* acting with agape love.**
2. **Rethinking mission from the “outside in” will require *Righteous Interrupters*.**
3. **As fear is calmed, we may be converted to welcome others as Christ welcomes us.**

As we begin today with the topic of “*Connected to Bear Good Fruit*” hear this poem *The Red Wing Church* by Ted Kooser, former U.S. Poet Laurette.

The Red Wing Church

*There's a tractor in the doorway of a church
in Red wing, Nebraska, in a coat of mud
and straw that drags the floor. A broken plow
sprawls beggar-like behind it on some planks
that make a sort of roadway up the steps.
The steeple's gone. A black tar-paper scar
that lightning might have made replaces it.
They've taken it down to change the house of God
to Homer Johnson's barn, but it's still a church,
with clumps of tiger lilies in the grass
and one of those boxlike, glassed-in signs
that give the sermon's topic (reading now
a birdnest and a little broken glass).
The good works of the Lord are all around.
the steeple top is standing in a garden
just up the alley; it's a henhouse now;
fat leghorns gossip at its crowded door.
Pews stretch on porches up and down the street,
the stained-glass windows style the mayor's house,
and the bell's atop the firehouse in the square.
The cross is only God knows where.ⁱ*

I. Our North Star is Love

Dr. Henry Howell was not the most popular professor at the small college I attended. Modest in appearance, slight of build and soft spoken. However, trekking through a forest, he seemed like a giant able to name every plant or animal. Kneeling beside him at creek edge to test the water or count species was transformative. We were fortunate. Ahead of his time, Henry Howell focused on *Ecology* and spoke of our role in valuing of diversity and the regenerative connections needed across all ecosystems – water, soil, plants, animals, air and human.

A devout man, Howell prayed as each class began often quoting Ephesians 3, that we be *rooted and ground of love*. On occasion he read from St. Augustine:ⁱⁱ I recall his Alabama accent as he summarized: **“God loves each as if there is none other in all the world to love and God loves all, as God loves each!”** Our friend, theologian Marjorie Suchocki writes prayer involves a God who “works with the world as it is, in order to bring it to where it can be.”ⁱⁱⁱ Ours is an interdependent, relational and regenerative world.

Ted Kooser’s poem *The Red Wing Church* portrays disconnection – parts of an old church are shed, scattered across town. The poem summarizes what many perceive is happening to all churches, in rural places and small towns; AND in urban neighborhoods and suburbs as well. Difficult transitions and decline are evident. Young people in ever greater numbers say, “Christianity today no longer looks like Jesus.”^{iv} Our youth are able to connect with others around the world on social media and, sadly, they are often disconnected from any faith community. The church that will not speak truth in a time of deception or act in loving ways, in a time of hate is not trusted.^v Christians are viewed as being bigoted and distrusting science.^{vi}

“*Making Disciples for Jesus Christ for the Transformation of the World*” may fall quickly from our lips but -- what if we are the ones to be transformed – first? A sustainable future will require more than techniques, strategies or doctrinal purity. At our best we are a people who *watch over one another in love*. Steve Harper reminds us “Love is the north star in our theological sky and the singular mark of a mature Christian.”^{vii} After this winter’s ice-storm a layperson told me his church was installing gas-powered generators to prevent future damage. I couldn’t help but

chuckle and think, “Yes, and some Holy Spirit powered re-generators might be even more helpful.

II. Regenerative Connectors

Recently I had lunch with two friends. One, a seminary administrator, spent several minutes outlining school programs focused on leadership. As lunch ended, the other friend, John McKnight, known for his work in asset-based community development, gently offered, “*Maybe we should focus less on leadership and give more attention to connector-ship.*” McKnight, spoke of the core value of relationship, of informal associations, where leaders leave space for imagination of others.

Rev. Michael Mather’s, recent book *Having Nothing, Possessing Everything* identifies the flow of his ministry in three parts: *Naming, Blessing and Connecting*.^{viii} Like Dr. Howell in the natural world, Mather is about cultivating the deep root systems of diverse, regenerative and enduring connections. Within each parish, neighborhood, town, or city, connections based on q Christ already present among the neighbor, on mutual respect and love waiting to be *named, blessed and connected*.

In a largely drive-in, urban parish I know, a member from the neighborhood would often interrupt finance, trustees or UMW meetings asking for five minutes to introduce a neighbor who would share something about themselves. Folks began to look forward to these unscheduled regenerative interruptions. New friendships were formed; mutual lessons were learned. Sometimes such connections can happen in a short time, sometimes it takes much longer. **We need to remember that some mission efforts are 100-year work, or longer.**

On my study wall is a photograph of two women – Elizabeth Eckford and Hazel Massery, standing together outside Little Rock Central High School in 1997. Photojournalist Will Counts was best known for an earlier photograph of the two women. It is an iconic image. An angry crowd yells abuses at a young Elizabeth Eckford on her way to school. She was one of the *Little Rock Nine*, who first integrated Central High School. Behind her, at the head of the crowd, is Hazel Massery, screaming hateful invectives.

I visited with Will Counts about these two photos several times. After 1957, he said he stayed in contact with each woman and regularly prayed for them. Then, at the 40th anniversary of Central High's desegregation, Will saw the two across a room. He said, "It was as if the Red Sea parted. There was an opening to bring them together." Will asked if they might make another photograph in front of the school. The relationship of Elizabeth and Hazel would never be an easy one, but a regenerative connection was begun, for them and a larger community. It is a complex story, there are many tributaries in any relationship. Elizabeth and Hazel – and Will Counts, each had to choose a path, to join in *naming, blessing, connecting*.

Here is the basis of in-depth evangelism – regenerative connections with God and neighbor. The great Methodist missionary E. Stanley Jones wrote of Christ as both incarnate and excarnate.^{ix} Christ is present in human flesh and in all the connective tissues surround humankind. Jones quotes Colossians 3:11, "*Christ is all things and in all people.*"^x Jones famously said: "*An individual gospel without a social gospel is a soul without a body and a social gospel without an individual gospel is a body without a soul, One is a ghost, the other a corpse.*"^{xi} Here he is pictured with three fingers raised, which he would be quick to tell us, represented the oldest creed of the church, "*Jesus is Lord.*"

Kaitlin B. Curtice writes: *The bloodline of God is connected to everything... shells on the ocean shore, the mushrooms growing in the forest, the trees stretching to the clouds, the tiniest speck of snow in the winter, and our dust-to-dustness – we are all connected and tethered to this sacred gift of creation.*^{xii}

There are many such linkages here in North Texas I believe display the health of the body. Wesley UMC in Greenville and St. Luke "Community" UMC in Dallas partnered early with hospitals to serve as COVID vaccination sites. Churches, like Warren UMC in Dallas were warming stations in February. St. Stephen in Mesquite joined with the Red Cross for community-wide blood drives throughout the pandemic. First UMC Sherman linked with mental health professionals offering clinical care. These and dozens of other expressions of God's love took place across your conference.

Overlooked Connections – Our Root System

Rachel Sussman's book *The Oldest Living Things In the World*^{xiii} offers photos and essays about long-lived plant and animal species. She highlights the enormous grove of Aspen at Utah's Fishlake National Forest called *Pando*. In Latin *Pando* means, "I spread." Amazingly, this grove is one, single system. It may appear as hundreds of separate trees but, in fact, it is a massive one-hundred-six-(106)-acre-wide individual. Each of 47,000 trees is genetically identical. The root system, all connected, is one plant!^{xiv} Similar colonies of massive and ancient individuals have been found in coral ocean reefs.^{xv}

Mark Feldmeir, pastor of St. Andrew UMC in Colorado writes, "*Such kinship means that they are one living organism and one living community simultaneously... When an individual tree dies, it's as if the grove loses an essential member of the body.*"^{xvi}

"A forest is much more than what you see," says Suzanne Simard, professor at the University of British Columbia. Simard tracks carbon isotopes over long distances through underground inter-fungal networks connecting the forest above. Put simply she says, "trees talk and often over vast distances through shared nutrients and chemistry and fungal webs in the soil."^{xvii} Today scientists, once skeptical, flock to learn that forests aren't a collection of individual trees, they are a harmonious, yet complicated social network.

Forester Peter Wohlleben, speaks of this as a *Wood-Wide-Web*. He asserts trees register pain, learn things and even seek to protect or nurse others nearby.^{xviii} He joins Simard in proposing a regular back and forth communication increasing the resilience of the entire community. They speak of "Hub trees" or "Mother trees" connected broadly with others in the forest managing the resources of the whole plant community. If too many hub trees are removed, they argue, the whole system can collapse.

I think of Margaret (Mazvita) Machinga as a mother tree for the church in Zimbabwe. Several years ago, on our way to worship, she suddenly pulled the small pickup truck to the roadside. She gets out shouting a few words in Shona. Looking back at me, she asks "Are you coming?"

Seconds later, screams of delight bubble up from the forest. Eight young children, HIV-AIDS orphans, who live under a bridge ahead, come running toward us. “Momma, momma,” they cry. Mazvita was their substitute “momma.” She brings food and takes them to Sunday School. Her ministry at the *Simukai Child Protection Centre* displays her love for and connection with these abandoned orphans. Mazvita finds them homes and reunites them with extended families, who are often reluctant to accept them.

What if we viewed our congregations as hub institutions, mother tree institutions, in our communities? What if we understood the deep root system of our faith connecting us all? What if we discovered again the evangelistic importance of *naming, blessing, connecting* with others, outsiders, as God’s children? Too often, our focus is either on the individuals sitting in the pew (or on the screen) or some large institutional structure – and we miss the intermediate web of community at our elbow. We miss the potential for new beginnings available through neighbor relationships.

The list of *regenerative connectors* that comes to my mind includes teachers, nurses, judges, day care providers, cooks and bus drivers. There are farmers, crafts persons, bankers, law officers, business executives, journalists, and social workers. I think of physicians, counselors, hospital administrators. Let me give you some specific examples of regenerative connectors:

In Dallas I think of City Square’s poverty-fighting-work. If you want to hear an institutional conversion story, you need to connect with a member of this annual conference, The Rev. Larry James.^{xix} In his books and conversation he tells of a remarkable transformation from seeing the poor as clients to valuing them as coworkers. James makes it clear: “Everybody is rich and everyone is poor, just in different ways. Everyone is worthy of respect. Respect is the great change agent of social reality.”^{xx}

There is the Rev. Dr. John Fanestil in San Diego who not only works to provide basic resources for immigrants, like popup kitchens; but also coordinates a worship service on Sundays at the border where folks gather on both sides to share prayers and songs and a blessing no wall can separate.

Grant Merrell, a young pastor in Northern Indiana, expands his pastoral duties to share brief faith messages on his *TikTok* account. Last report he had nearly 300,000 followers. I think of two women. Beth A. Richardson and Mary Lou Redding who write of the power and connection of God's love and encourage others in their publications by the *Upper Room*.

Wildstyle Paschall, an independent African American artist, journalist, photographer and friend who keeps an animated conversation going with Indianapolis public officials. They have come to value and know they will be challenged by his research, sharp wit and careful reporting.

The Rev. Ingrid McIntyre, co-founder of *Open Table Nashville*, seeks to “break the mold of what people call the church.” She led in the building of twenty-two micro homes known as The Village at Glencliff.^{xxi} It is a safe place for “medically vulnerable neighbors who are chronically homeless” as they wait for permanent housing. The homes form a sacred halo over Glencliff United Methodist Church.

There is the prophetic work of the Rev. Hannah Adair Bonner, Director of *Frontera Wesley* in Tucson. Along with campus ministry, Hannah's witness includes producing films, podcasts and the convening national gatherings of younger UMC emerging leaders. Hannah reaches the disconnected, whether on the streets, in prison or among the undocumented.

There are hundreds of other illustrations of United Methodists in the U.S. who share the gospel in such fruitful ways. We often miss seeing them and the rootage that connects us. Hear the prayer from Ephesians 3:18: ¹⁸ *I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth,* ¹⁹ *and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*

No matter the future, Methodism's contributions may change in form, but our rootage is still deep and wide. Thirty years ago the congregation I served supported a young faculty member at Africa University. There was no theological litmus test for the professor or those offering support. That young man, Eben Nhiwatiwa, was later elected bishop. Today Mazvita Machinga and her husband, Gift, work with Bishop Nhiwatiwa. After their theological education in the

U.S. they returned. Mazvita, our mother tree, today is a leader in mental health in Zimbabwe and now Chair of Pastoral Care and Counseling at Africa University. Gift, her spouse, is a pastor, conference leader and episcopal candidate. Methodism's ecology in Zimbabwe is intertwined with our own. Africa University now prepares graduates for work with NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) across Africa, in Europe and Australia. Many are on the forefront responding to the COVID pandemic. Dr. Henry Howell would understand this ecology, diverse and regenerative – root systems of faith: *naming, blessing, connecting*.

Our takeaways, or trail markers, are:

- 1) Loving action is our North Star and singular mark of a mature Christian.**
- 2) Deep evangelization extends across space and time to name, bless and connect.**
- 3) Each mission site can be God's mother tree in the social forest where it is located.**

The poem about the Red Wing Church ends with this line: “The cross is only God knows where.” It can be read as a statement of loss and inevitable secularization. Or, it can be read as a confession that God's work goes on often unseen and scattered beneath the suffice of what we know and think we understand. *Righteous interrupters* and *regenerative connectors* act because they see a church that is still unfinished, but none-the-less “rooted and grounded in love.” I hold that God's love extends far beyond our divisions and scatteredness. It often extends beyond my vision. Still I delight that we are given the privilege of naming it when it appears among us.

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Ephesians 3:14-21 (NRSV)

¹⁴ For this reason I bow my knees before the Father,^[g] ¹⁵ from whom every family^[h] in heaven and on earth takes its name. ¹⁶ I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, ¹⁷ and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. ¹⁸ I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

²⁰ Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

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Colossians 3:8-11

*⁸ But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices¹⁰ and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. ¹¹ In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; **but Christ is all and in all!***

Deuteronomy 6:10-12 When GOD, your God, ushers you into the land he promised through your ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to give you, you're going to walk into large, bustling cities you didn't build, well-furnished houses you didn't buy, come upon wells you didn't dig, vineyards and olive orchards you didn't plant. When you take it all in and settle down, pleased and content, make sure you don't forget how you got there—GOD brought you out of slavery in Egypt.

ENDNOTES

- ⁱ Kooser, Ted, “The Red Wing Church,” in *Sure Signs*, University of Pittsburg Press, 1980, p. 81.
- ⁱⁱ St. Augustine (of Hippo), *The Confessions, The Works of St. Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, Book 3.11.19, translation by Maria Boulding, Hyde Park: New City Press, 1997, p.90. “*O good and all-powerful God, who cares for each of us as though each were the only one, and for all alike with the same tenderness you show to each.*”
- ⁱⁱⁱ Suchocki, Marjorie Hewitt, [In God's Presence: Theological Reflections on Prayer](#)
- ^{iv} Kinneman, David, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving the Church*, Baker Books, 2016. See also: Barna Research, available at: <https://www.barna.com/research/a-new-generation-expresses-its-skepticism-and-frustration-with-christianity/>
- ^v Pew Research Center: Religion and Public Life: Religious Identity, May 29, 2018. Available at: <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/05/29/religious-identity/>
- ^{vi} Richardson, Randi, “How Black pastors under 40 are trying to get their peers back into the pews, NBCBLK, June 10, 20212.
- ^{vii} Harper, Steve, *Holy Love*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, p. 55.
- ^{viii} Mather, Michael, *Having Nothing, Possessing Everything*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018).
- ^{ix} Jones, E. Stanley, “In Christ” (Nashville: Abingdon,1961) p. 296.
- ^x See Steve Harper’s *Oboedire: Love: Son Love (Christ)*, February 4, 2020. Available at: <https://oboedire.wordpress.com/2020/02/04/love-son-love-christ/>
- ^{xi} Jones, E. Stanley, *A Song of Ascents*, (Nashville, Abingdon, 1968) p. 386.
- ^{xii} Curtice, Kaitlin B., *Native: Identity, Belonging, and Rediscovering God, ???*
- ^{xiii} Rachel Sussman, essays by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Carl Zimmer, (University of Chicago Press, 2014)
- ^{xiv} Ibid. The Pando is estimated to be 80,000 years old; it is a colony of 47,000 trees.
- ^{xv} Ibid
- ^{xvi} Feldmeir, Mark, *A House Divided*, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2020) p 103. He notes: “*What happens to one aspen happens to all the aspens in the grove. As one living root system, the aspen grove delights in each of its trees, treating each individual as a cherished part of the larger body.*”

^{xvii} Simard, Suzanne, “How Trees Talk to Each Other,” TED Talk, Her research at first was seen by many scientists as foolish. She asserted “**trees** talk, often and over vast distances through shared nutrients and chemistry and fungal webs in the soil.” Available at <https://www.bring4th.org/forums/showthread.php?tid=13096>. See also Diane Toomey, “Exploring How and Why Trees ‘Talk’ to Each Other,” September 1, 2016. Available at: https://e360.yale.edu/features/exploring_how_and_why_trees_talk_to_each_other. Also see: <https://www.abc.net.au/science/articles/2015/05/20/4236600.htm>;

^{xviii} Wohleben, Peter, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, What They Communicate – Discoveries from a Secret World*, Greystone Books, 2016.

^{xix} James, Larry, “The Wealth of the Poor: How Valuing Every Neighbor Restores Hope in Our Cities,” <https://purposebuiltcommunities.org/videos/the-wealth-of-the-poor-how-valuing-every-neighbor-restores-hope-in-our-cities/>

^{xx} Ibid. James says, “The wealth of the community cannot be quantified financially. But there is wealth there, social capital, innate intelligence about to how to survive... on the terms of the community itself.” He goes on, “The human dignity pirates are not coming up in here on my watch ever again.” He tells of the *Cottages at Hickory Crossing* where fifty (50) persons who were chronically without homes now have shelter.

^{xxi} McIntyre, Ingrid, Available at: <http://www.villageatglencliff.org/>