Sunday, May 21, 2000
CONNECTED OR DISCONNECTED
John 15:1-5

A phrase commonly heard in everyday conversations is, “It’s a small world.” This observation is made when you meet someone who knows someone you know in another part of the country or world. When this comment is made to me, my reply now is, “The world is the same size it has always been. Today we live in a more connected world, and in other ways, it is a more disconnected world.”

We are connected in so many ways: worldwide radio coverage, with small transistor radios easily available and less and less expensive. Television is now spread over the globe. In a small mud hut in rural Egypt with no running water or indoor plumbing, I saw a television set tuned to CNN world news. I saw the same in rural Russia in a remote village. Cell phones are being used around the world. And there’s the Internet, fax machines, Federal Express, and all kinds of other connections.

Because the world is more heavily populated, there are people everywhere. You can meet more different people in a single day than our ancestors met in a lifetime. We are connected and networked. People today have access to a wide variety of people and an increasing number of worlds. Jeremy Rifkin, in a new book, calls it The Age of Access.

Listen to this quote from that book: “The age of access is also bringing with it a new type of human being. The young people of the new ‘protean’ generation are far more comfortable conducting business and engaging in social activity in the world of electronic commerce and cyberspace, and they adapt easily to the many simulated worlds that make up the cultural economy. For them, access is a way of life, and while property is important, being connected is even more important.”

Our world is so connected that we are inventing creative gatekeepers to keep people from being connected. We’ve all had the experience of telephoning a business or some other kind of organization and getting a recorded message and a menu with 12 different options. The recorded voice says, “Your business is very important to us. If you want to speak with a service representative, press 1, or customer service, press 2,” and then there are many other options. Sometimes none of them fit the reason for which you’ve called, and by that time, you’ve forgotten all the menu options and have to start over in order to select the second-best option — or press 0 for an operator, only to hear that the operator is not available at this time. It makes me wonder if my business is really that important to talk with a living, breathing person in many instances.

I’m trying to learn to live with all of the connections and disconnections but sometimes wonder — what if God installed an automated answering service?

Imagine trying to connect with God in prayer and hearing, “Thank you for praying. Please select one of the following four options. Press 1 for a request. Press 2 to offer a thanksgiving. Press 3 to complain. Press 4 for all other options,” and then hearing, “We’re sorry, due to heavier-than-expected volume, please pray later. Your prayers are important to us.”

It has become fashionable today to call the earth a “global village.” But that’s an oxymoron. A village, in its original meaning, was a manageable place with common ideals, linked by an

agreed-upon sense of order, a place where you could live without having to lock your doors at night or while you were away on vacation. But such is not the case with our increasingly larger cities. We are connected by living in close proximity to each other but disconnected in many other ways. Never before in history have so many people — whether in Manhattan or in Cairo or in Lincoln — been surrounded by so much that is alien (in customs, languages, and neighborhoods).

When the 20th century began, fewer than 3 percent of all humans lived in the city; by the time it ended, the figure was roughly 50 percent and growing. The number of countries on the planet in the 20th century more than tripled. We are more connected, and yet more disconnected. People on every continent may be watching Michael Jordan advertising Nike shoes on CNN. But beneath the surface, inevitably, traditional differences remain. George Bernard Shaw declared generations ago that England and America were two countries divided by a common language. Now the world often resembles 200 countries divided by a common frame of reference.

Jesus had something to say about being connected or disconnected, which has increasing relevance in today's world. In the scripture reading read earlier, he used the metaphor of the vine and the branches, talking about the importance of being connected to God and to each other, and the danger of being disconnected.

He said, "Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing."

One way to stay connected in the midst of all the forces that work to keep us disconnected is to be bound together by what unites us. We have to remember that what unites us is always more important than what divides us, and that is the fact that we are all branches of one vine — human beings created by God in God's image. We all come from the same vine. Beneath our skins and outward physical differences, we are made of the same stuff. When a pathologist does an autopsy on a human being who has died and gets inside the body, she knows that inside we are all constructed in the same way.

People like Emerson used other language, but the "over-soul" reminds us that we are joined not only by our habits and urges and our fears but also by our dreams and that best part of us that senses an identity larger than you or I. It's what all religions call God. In a new book, The Global Soul, Pico Iyer writes: "Look up wherever you are, and you can see what we have in common; look down — or inside — and you can see something universal. It is only when you look around you that you note divisions." In other words, when you look around you, you see various branches and sometimes forget that all the branches are connected to one vine or one source, God. We are tempted to forget we are the branches and assume instead that we are the vine.

The question we all face is: What is it that keeps us connected to the vine?

One way is through prayer or meditation, or whatever other name you want to give it.

In addition, we have to live our prayers. We stay connected to God by keeping our connections to one another healthy. This takes place in many ways. We now know that as we grow older, if we stay connected to others in loving relationships or even as friends, we live longer and

healthier lives. On the other hand, loneliness shortens lives. Lonely people are more likely to become sick, and people die from broken hearts caused by the absence of love, whether physically or emotionally.

In the first letter of John in the New Testament, the writer describes it this way: “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.... No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is perfected in us.” Did you hear that? When we love one another, God lives in us. That’s the closest connection we can have.

Later, the same writer uses the word “abide.” God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. To use the vine and branches metaphor, the way you stay connected to the vine, and therefore connected to God, is by loving and serving others.

Lest you misunderstand, when Jesus used the word love, he was not necessarily talking about being in an intimate relationship with another person or even being a close friend. In the Bible, justice is also a form of love. Love, in the biblical meaning of the word, means to treat other people — even those you dislike — with respect, dignity, and honor. It is the opposite of using another person for your own purposes. It is the opposite of manipulating another person.

The parable of the Good Samaritan illustrates this. The Samaritan who helped the injured Jew in the ditch by the side of the road did not try to establish a long-term friendship. He gave the man the needed emergency treatment and then took him to the nearest place where he could find longer-term care and went on his own way. Jesus described this as “loving one’s neighbor.”

In another place, Jesus told the parable of the sheep and the goats to describe how to stay connected with God and with one another. The righteous people in the story are surprised to discover that they are connected with God and wonder when and how it happened. God answers them, “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then the connected ask in amazement, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And God will say, “As you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” When you do such things, you stay connected with God and with others. Amen.