

**Pastor Eric's Sermon**  
**September 9, 2018**  
**Rally Day**

**“Connect” – James 2: 14-17**

Earlier this summer, I preached on how our relationship with God is ever evolving, that it is ever-changing or growing as we are exposed to new discoveries, insights and experiences of grace, forgiveness, love, inclusion and acceptance. This is true, but not just in our relationship with God. It is true in all our relationships, because we all know relationships can't evolve if you don't invest in them. You can't invest without staying connected.

When I think about connecting to God, I think of my human interactions and experiences because I believe God is always present exhibiting grace, mercy, and love whether we recognize it or not. If we allow it, these experiences of grace, mercy, and love lead to growth and new awareness of how we interact with God and one another. Engaging in our relationships helps us realize how vast and healing God's grace is, but we need to invest in these relationships to discover this. We need to connect with God, our neighbor, and the world.

What does connecting with God, neighbor, and self look like? How do we do it? I believe it starts here in worship, but it only starts here. We need to have a bigger investment, for as the writer of James says, *Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. (James 2:17)*. It's not that our good works save us. It is that doing, acting on, and living out our faith connects us physically, spiritually, and emotionally. I think the following two stories will help flesh out what I am saying.

*I have said before that my experience growing up in my home church is one of the major reasons why I am here today. My parents were a very big part of my life, and while they were very involved in the church in my younger years, it was not their involvement that helped shape my faith story. It was the Pastor, who remains a good friend, many of the people with whom I served on various committees and my experiences with my peers and counselors in youth group. We had a large youth group that crossed different economic, social and political spectrums. The adult leadership included key lay people as well as the Senior Pastor and a seminarian.*

*I was a reserved, kind of awkward adolescent, not at all the cool breeze I am today. I had friends, but I was not what one would call popular. I didn't have a lot of self-confidence, and I always felt a tremendous amount of pressure to measure up. Some of it came from my home life, but it was also self-imposed. At church and in youth group, I felt more comfortable. I felt accepted and included, welcomed, even though I was a little awkward, quiet, and reserved. Our church and youth group offered me the opportunity to explore who I was, and who I was becoming. I felt safe, valued. Our youth group did retreats and other events that allowed us to get to know ourselves and each other as we interacted in significant ways. There, my story and contribution mattered.*

*I went to a large high school that was a merger of three middle schools. Kids in our youth group came from all three middle schools as well as a neighboring school district. Outside of youth group, we all had our own circles of friends and everyone respected those boundaries. The one difference was this. When we passed each other in the hallways going from class to class, or when we saw each other in the lunch room, we always acknowledged each other. A wave, a nod, a smile, a word, some recognition. It was a quiet, secret bond that just evolved, which*

*said, 'I see you, and you matter to me.' When a friend would ask, 'Who's that? How do you know him or her?' I would simply respond, 'From church. We are in youth group together.'*

*Two months ago, I had lunch with my former pastor which I do often. We were talking about ministry and where the church is missing the mark. He said, and I am paraphrasing, that from his observation the church has forgotten its role of not just reminding people that they and everyone else matters, but also the importance of helping others embrace God's desire for them to be the person God intended them to be.*

*About 15 years ago, I was doing a January Midnight Run. At that time, the group I did these runs with did full runs, which meant the first stop was at 10 pm, and we ended at 3 am. We also left from a point about an hour north of here, which meant we left at 8 p.m. and returned about 4:30 or 5 in the morning.*

*I remember on this night, it was bitterly cold, and the wind was howling. It was probably 2:15, and I was tired, cold and a little cranky, because at night's end I still had a 90-minute drive home.*

*The clients that night were not particularly grateful. There were no real problems, just a lot of grumbling. I suspect it was because as cold as we were, they were even colder.*

*I was stationed at the front of the van on the passenger side. In addition to driving the van, my job was to hand out toiletries and blankets from the side door. I had had enough of the cold, so I jumped back into the van telling myself I needed to figure out the best route to our next stop. While sitting in the driver's seat with the heat on, a knock came to the passenger side window. It was one of our street friends.*

*I rolled down the window, and he said, 'I know it is cold, but do you mind if I ask you for a blanket?'*

*As I jumped out of van and ran around to give man a blanket, I remember saying to myself, 'What is wrong with you, Eric? Remember why you are here!'*

*I invite you to think about what it means for you to connect. What will you decide to do or continue to do to ensure your connection with God, this faith community and God's world grows and evolves?*

*Our goal, as a community of faith is to offer opportunities to connect. My hope is that each of us will chose to participate.*

*In that spirit, let us connect with God by preparing to receive the gifts of the bread and the cup.*

