

**Sermon Preached April 26, 2015
Year B, Easter 4
St. John's Episcopal Church
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Bradbury**

In the name of the living God, Amen.

A lonely frog, desperate for any form of company telephoned the Psychic Hotline to find out what his future has in store. His Personal Psychic Advisor advises him, "You are going to meet a beautiful young girl who will want to know everything about you." The frog is thrilled and says, "This is great! Where will I meet her, at work, at a party?" "No" says the psychic, "in a Biology class."¹

I think of Mother Teresa who once said: "The biggest disease today is not leprosy or cancer or tuberculosis, but rather the feeling of being unwanted, uncared for and deserted by everybody."²

A recent study shows that "Loneliness has dramatic consequences on health. Feeling isolated from others can disrupt sleep, raise blood pressure, lower immunity, increase depression, lower overall subjective wellbeing and increase the stress hormone cortisol."³ We all have a desire, and a need, to be known, to be loved, to be in relationship with others.

A few years ago at our annual Clergy Conference there were several very interesting presenters, and one in particular I thought was very helpful. A gentleman named Eric Law

¹ http://www.jokebuddha.com/joke/A_Lonely_Frog_1#ixzz3YN9SeU70

² <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/17/loneliness-report-bigger-killer-obesity-lonely-people>

³ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/17/loneliness-report-bigger-killer-obesity-lonely-people>

spoke about the various “currencies” in a congregation. He defines currencies as the resources available to us, and he discussed their connection to each other. In addition to the currency of money, he also discussed the currencies of - relationships – truth – wellness – time/space – gracious leadership. He sees all of these currencies as cyclical and feeding into each other. They are connected.

It helps to tell a story. Eric spoke of a church he was working with which was having great financial difficulties. The challenges were so bad that the leaders of the church had decided to sell their building. The thing was, while the original congregation was Anglo, they also had a thriving Chinese congregation which met in the sanctuary on Sunday afternoons, as well as an active Hispanic congregation which met at yet another time. When word was leaked to the Chinese congregation that the Anglo congregation was planning on selling the building, they were upset about the sale, and upset that they hadn’t been consulted. The Anglo congregation assumed that neither the Chinese nor Hispanic congregations had the financial resources to help so hadn’t told them about the financial challenges, and only after the fact, informed the Chinese. Neither one bothered to let the Hispanic congregation know anything.

When Eric was invited into the situation he told them he could solve their problem during four evening meetings, but it would involve all three congregations. They agreed. The first two meetings were simply relationship building between the congregations. Help them get to know each other, trust each other. During this time the Anglo congregation was impatiently asking Eric when they would start talking about the important stuff – namely, the money. He told them they would get to that. The third meeting was an evening of truth telling.

Each of the three congregations spoke, intentionally starting with the least powerful group. This meant the Hispanic congregation spoke first. They spoke of their love of the place and how hurt they were to be excluded from discussions leading up to the decision to sell the building. They then said that once they realized the seriousness of the situation, they had made plans to start a taco stand which would raise \$500/week toward the expenses of the church.

The Chinese congregation then rose to speak and also spoke of feeling marginalized in how the decision making process was handled, and said that they had since gone through the community and had raised over \$100,000 to save the building. By the time the Anglo congregation rose to speak, there was nothing left to say, because at that point all the money had been raised and the building was saved.

The story illustrates how beginning with the currency of relationship, it laid the foundation for truth to be told, which laid the foundation for wellness and trust within the community, which allowed for money to be raised, which allowed for the space to be saved. And that space allowed for ministry to happen and gracious leadership to flow and begin the cycle again with relationships. This cycle is how a sustainable congregation is maintained.

It all begins with relationships, each of the congregations actually being known by the other. Being known is where true trust and love begins.

The Anglo congregation no doubt believed they were being loving toward the Chinese and Hispanic congregations by taking on the financial challenges on their own, and probably said many kind words about the other's ministries. But they never really KNEW them. It was only when relationships were established that the real truth came out. And once the truth came out, healing could happen. Jesus talks about being the Good Shepherd because he states, "I know my own and my own know me." Relationship is the foundation of the Good Shepherd. Knowing the other, having deep and meaningful relationships with God and each other is what makes a church, or any human institution, strong and sustainable.

Loneliness and a lack of relationships, is not only bad for your health, it causes a cascade of other losses, the loss of these other currencies, both for the individual, and for the community to which they belong. Love cannot happen without relationship.

"The Indian theologian D. T. Niles once noticed a young Indian shepherd boy keeping a huge flock of sheep. He stopped and asked, 'How many sheep do you have?' 'I don't know,' answered the boy, 'I can't count.' Niles asked him, 'How do you know if some of the sheep haven't wandered off when you get to the place where you're going to camp at night?' To his astonishment, the boy answered, 'I don't know how many wander off, but I know each one. I can't count, but each sheep has a name, and I know their names.'" We learn today that Jesus also is the Good Shepherd. He knows us each by name. He knows everything about you, the good, the bad, and the ugly, and he loves you. He desires relationship with us, and desires for us to be in relationship with him and each other.

When we read the 23rd psalm, it doesn't say 'The Lord is the shepherd,' it says 'The Lord is MY shepherd.' We are personally known. At the same time, while God knows us, She has a desire for us to know Her. We are to get to know the Almighty. We cannot love with knowing the object of that love. We get to know God by spending time with God, and that is done through prayer. Prayer is not simply kneeling down with a wish list. Prayer is experiencing God. Prayer is about getting to know God. This may take the form of silence; of asking for the Almighty's presence with you in the silence. Prayer might mean a walk in the woods, asking God to accompany you. Prayer is the practice, in whatever form, of spending time with God, getting to know the Almighty, and by doing so, beginning to see with God's eyes. For it is only in knowing God that we come to love God. Jesus the Good Shepherd gave us the model to follow.

With the knowledge that we are unconditionally loved, we gain the confidence to then share that love with others. Jesus also calls us to love one another. This is only possible through knowing each other. Spending time together. Sharing truth with each other. Times of fellowship, activities, and ministry together outside of Sunday worship is the glue that holds a church together. It also holds together a family or any community. Loneliness is not an individual challenge. When one member is not known, it weakens the entire community. And we are to reach out beyond our borders also. Building relationships with those outside the community, or church, or family, or business, makes them stronger. It makes love, and all the other currencies possible. How might all of us make the time to know and be known?

Jesus modeled for us a life of love including knowing his own, building relationships, and loving those both in and outside the community. Loneliness is not of the Kingdom. We are called by the Good Shepherd to deepen our relationships with God and each other, so that we too might live lives of love. Amen.