

“Connected”

**Rev. Lucy M. Alexander
Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
February 11, 2007**

Jeremiah 17:5-10; Luke 6:17-26

Several years ago, my family and I went to a magic show. I'd always thought of magic as something that was done at children's birthday parties. Or maybe something a loving uncle might do with a young nephew. "Ok, pick a card. Now put that card back anywhere, anywhere in the pack." Or the old coin trick. A coin in the palm of the hand. Now you see it, now you don't. But this magic show was magic raised to an art form. It took place in a big old theater in Beverly, Massachusetts. Maybe some of you have been there. And the magic involved a full stage production of magic and the illusions magic is based on. You look one way, and something is happening in another corner that you are not focused on. Boxes display surprising contents. People seem to disappear. Magic shows are all about illusion and the tricks our mind and our perceptions can play on us.

There are some who tend to think the Christian faith is magical. There can be the tendency to think that our faith, like magic, involves an escape from reality. I mean, really, how does a woman touch Jesus' garment and become healed when all the doctors in the world have failed? What about all those miracles? How really could so few loaves and fish feed so many people? And then there's Jesus' death, the tomb, and His resurrection. Maybe he didn't really die. Maybe it was just the medicine of the time that thought he was dead. And even if he was dead, people couldn't really have seen him again. It was all just an illusion.

But our Christian faith is just the opposite. It's not at all magical. And it's not at all about illusion. Our Christian faith does something completely different. It exposes illusion. It tears away the veil of illusion and lets us glimpse the truth. It lets us glimpse the way the world really is. It does this in ways that can seem counter-intuitive. It does this in ways that can seem contradictory or even downright impossible. But that is because these are the only ways in which truth – profound truth – can be expressed in a world full of illusion.

The illusion that today's text exposes is the illusion that we are separate, one from another. It's the illusion that our lives are lived in separate spheres, spheres that might bump up against each other from time to time. But then they bounce off each other, like balls on a billiard table. It's the illusion that our lives never really penetrate each other. It's the illusion that is at the core of so many of the "isms" we encounter: racism, sexism, anti-Semitism. It's the illusion that I am here and you are there and there is no bridge between us. It's the illusion that you are the other and not part of me.

I think of my most recent visit to a hospital emergency room. The person I was with had been told, after some blood test results, that she should get admitted as soon as possible. I found myself, thinking, maybe we won't have to go through the emergency room. But it was after hours, and even though the doctor had called ahead to say the patient was coming, there was the regular procedure that needed to be gone through of registration and then waiting for triage. While we were there, the outpatient doctor called to make sure the patient was at the hospital because the situation was volatile. Clearly there was quite a bit of concern.

But the people at the admitting desk were completely unresponsive. "You'll have to wait," they said, "and there's no telling how long that wait might be." We asked if maybe they could just give us a ballpark estimate: "half an hour or 6 hours?" They couldn't tell us. But the hard part wasn't just the lack of information. It was the sense I got that we just didn't matter. It felt as though the patient could have been in cardiac arrest and we would have simply been told to take our place in line.

I began to look around me. There was a man over there with his head in his hands, looking as though he were in utter despair. There was the couple talking in quick hushed tones to one another, clearly trying to wrap their thoughts around the situation. And then there were the babies. How could they know why they weren't home, pain free and in bed? But here they were, out in the cold night, having no idea what this strange world of the emergency room was. And there were their new parents, panicked at what might lie ahead. "What have we come to?" I found myself thinking. How is it that we have all landed here, in this spot, at this time? And yet here we are seemingly on completely separate tracks of crisis and pain, our lives having nothing to do with each other.

Today's texts expose the illusion of separateness in both words and images. They point to the much deeper reality of our connection to God and to one another. In Luke, we heard the beginning of what is called the Sermon on the Plain. This is Luke's counterpart to the Sermon on the Mount in the gospel of Matthew. Luke's account, however, does not take place on a mountaintop. A UCC commentator notes that "rather, after a time of prayer up on the mountain, Jesus gathers his disciples and brings them down to a place accessible to many people, many different people, including even Gentiles and the crowds of people who were marginalized because of disease and unclean spirits. The text says that he healed not just a few but all of those who came to him, hungry in so many ways for dignity and acceptance, for wholeness and health, for forgiveness, freedom and hope."¹ Here we find Jesus, empowered by God, so clearly expressing his solidarity with people – people of all races, nationalities, faiths.

And then there's Jeremiah. "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit." As one commentator puts it, "deep roots will be able to find water, even in times of drought. These trees will not be anxious and will not cease to bear fruit."

¹ SAMUEL, Lectionary Commentary on United Church of Christ website.

I can remember a trip a few years ago to Albuquerque, New Mexico, to visit Bob's mother and his brother and his wife, Al and Liz. I fell in love with the desert. I loved the way you could see for miles. I loved the way the rock formations seemed to reveal the very shape of the earth. I loved the way people lived, their homes and pottery feeling as though they themselves emerged from the desert.

But I'll never forget the day we set out for a road trip down to the southern part of New Mexico. We were to be gone only a couple of days. So we left most of our things at Al and Liz's house, packing lightly. We made sandwiches for lunch, made sure our maps and guide books were in the car. And then we started to say goodbye when Liz came out to the car. She looked at us in amazement. "Where's your water?" she asked. We showed her about 5 bottles of spring water ready to drink. She looked nonplussed. "You just don't understand," she said. "People die out there."

Water is the most basic stuff of life. Some substantial percentage of the earth's surface is covered with water. We ourselves emerge from water, out of our mother's wombs. The body can't live without water – you can survive without food for a good number of days – but without water you will die. The truth that we are connected to one another and to God is a basic to life as this everyday substance we call water. The Bible tells us this over and over again. Our connectedness is the truth about life. When we think we are separate, when we act as if we are separate, we are living out of an illusion, just like those illusions that can be created with decks of cards.

A friend of mine was recently diagnosed with breast cancer. The doctors thought it was fairly localized and were prepared for surgery when it was discovered that it had spread to her bones. She and her family couldn't believe it. But she had had all sorts of scans – CT, MRI, bone scan, and they all revealed the same thing. The pictures showed porousness in many places in her skeleton. That seemed to be the fact of the situation. She pictured her ribs and her arms as being like a sea shell which the ocean has turned into a kind of sieve, riddled with holes.

But one day, as she was driving, she had a strange sensation. The holes in her bones were being filled. Her skeleton had been left with gaps, but it was as if those gaps had simply been put there so that they could be filled by the Holy Spirit. She felt herself whole again, made new by God's breath within her. The science was only a partial truth. The deeper truth of the matter was that God was in her and she was in God and she was no longer separate and alone.