

Sermon Preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia  
on Sunday February 8<sup>th</sup> 2009 by the Reverend Alan Neale  
“Connection - The Challenges”

Mark 1:37 “The disciples said to Jesus, ‘Everyone is searching for you’”.

In his book, ‘The Complex Christ’, Kester Brewin writes this, ““Only Connect...” wrote E. M. Forster as the opening to *Howards End*, his critique of a London beset by the automobile and other machines, changing at an enormous pace, a city of “anger and telegrams”. It was good advice. “If only I could connect...” we still cry; no telegrams now, but spinning blogs like cotton candy, conferences like desperate arachnids, trying to find some pathway, some connection, some del.icio.us tag to hold with people as they speed by our screens at 10Mbps... Therein lies the irony of Forster’s epigraph, for as technology [has] roared us into urbanity with such speed, [it has] perhaps ripped apart some vital connections between us...”.

Mark 1:37 “The disciples said to Jesus, ‘Everyone is searching for you’”.

‘The Soloist’ is the book chosen as the text for the 2009 One Book, One Philadelphia program and, as in previous years, this church hosts a series of sermons on the One Book, One Philadelphia text - this is the second of three ‘Connection - The Challenges’.

Some weeks back, at the Inaugural Dinner and Lecture, the author, Steve Lopez, said (in a rather wide-ranging, provocative and engaging speech) “This book is all about the power to connect”.

E.M. Forster writes of the human need to connect.

St. Mark writes, “The disciples said to Jesus, ‘Everyone is searching for you’”.

And, in fact, the whole of today’s Gospel (Mark 1:29-39) is literally awash with expressions and experiences of connection.

Verse 29 - Jesus connects with Simon and Andrew and visits their home

Verse 31 - Jesus connects with Simon’s mother-in-law in her sickness, “he takes her by the hand and lifts her up”

Verse 31 - Jesus connects the woman with her community, “she began to serve them”

Verse 34 - Jesus connects with the sick, the outcasts and

Verse 35 - Jesus connects with God his Father, “he went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed”.

No wonder then St. Mark writes “The disciples said to Jesus, ‘Everyone is searching for you’”.

No wonder then that this book, ‘The Soloist’ has made such an impact on its readers; no wonder then that this book has been made into a film to be released later this year.

No wonder because... each one of us is “searching” in some way for connection. It pains, it grieves, it disables, it demeans us when we feel disconnected - within our world, within our society, within our church, within our family, within... ourselves.

Steve Lopez (the journalist), on the streets of Los Angeles, meets Nathaniel Ayers (the street musician) who suffers the pain of disconnection - for he is without human contact, he is without a home and, in his profound mental illness, he is often without serenity, understanding and acceptance.

‘The Soloist’ is a vivid, moving (sometimes frustrating) account of two men in process of connection with each other and with their world.

But this process is beset with challenges - challenges of perception, personality and perseverance.

**“Connection - the challenge of perception”**. Many people, before Steve Lopez, had simply overlooked, ignored - perhaps simply had not seen Nathaniel Ayers. If they gave him a second glance they saw only, in Mr. Lopez’s words, “an odd picture of grubby refinement”, they saw only a “strange place to practice. The ground shakes when buses roar by, and his strings are barely audible in the orchestra of horns, trucks and sirens. Men and women move about, duty-bound, ignoring him for the most part as they disappear around corners and into entryways. The man plays on, a lone fiddler”. Mr. Lopez learns that “Nathaniel is not a mentally ill musician, as I have been referring to him, but a musician with mental illness. It is a subtle but significant difference, recognizing the person before the condition”. Perhaps, no wonder then, at most 12 Step Meetings the individual identifies him/herself first by name and then... and then by the particular nature of his/her addictive illness!

When we merely, only, identify, perceive people by type, by category then connection is difficult if not nigh impossible. We demean ourselves and we surely demean others when we lightly use categories such as “homeless, jobless, shiftless, mentally ill”.

In his burning, compelling desire to connect people with Jesus, St. Paul determines not to see them only, merely by type or category... the Jew, the Gentile, the weak. Rather to see them as individuals and thereby to connect with them “becoming” (I Corinthians 9:23) “all things to all people, that I might by all means save some”... connect them with the God who loves them and yearns to rescue and save them.

**“Connection - the challenge of personality”**. In the preface to his book, Mr. Lopez writes of Mr. Ayers “he looks like a man who has learned to trust no-one”. Steve tells Nathaniel “I’m in a hurry at the moment but I’d like to come back and hear you play”. And then we read, “‘Oh all right’, he says, smiling appreciatively... but with trepidation”. Here is a man not easily given to trust and confidence!

Through bitter and traumatic experience Nathaniel has become accustomed to lack of connection... “[Nathaniel] longed for a relationship with someone, particularly a man, who would feel [proud] of him”.

A counselor, Casey Horan, says to Steve Lopez, “We need to get him [Nathaniel] to let go of that cart. He needs to trust that his apartment is safe, and that he can manage without his rolling security blanket”. And Lopez comments, “The cart really is about security and letting go of it would be like letting go of the side of the pool for the first time”.

In her novel, ‘Out’, Natsuo Kirino writes of Yayoi “she seemed to be dragging a good deal of emotional baggage through the world. Almost unconsciously she held on to yesterday’s sorrows”.

A message on my voice mail this past week inquired, “Do you do exorcisms?”. Well... Jesus did! He connected with the sick, identified their demons, cast them out and... (Mark 1:34) “he would not permit them to speak”.

In order for us to enjoy the essential experience of connection, the time must come when we are set free from the demons of our past and listen to them... no more for God will have the final word of love and liberation!

**And, finally, “Connection - the challenge of perseverance”**. Steve Lopez writes, “The high of our trip to Disney Hall has begun to fade and Nathaniel is wearing me out... every time I think I have tied a pretty bow on this story, it unravels.. I am beginning to resent the demands [Nathaniel] puts on me”.

The book begins with this ringing affirmation of the golden rule of journalism: “Everyone has a story”. In the book, Mr. Lopez never surrenders this hope though at times he is tempted so to do.

Today’s reading from the prophet Isaiah contains these stunning words from chapter 40 (verses 27 & 28) “Why would you ever complain or whine saying, ‘God has lost track of me. He doesn’t care what happens to me?’. Don’t you know anything? Haven’t you been listening? God doesn’t come and go. God lasts. He’s Creator of all you can see or imagine. He doesn’t get tired out, doesn’t pause to catch his breath.”. Friends... this God, our God perseveres to the end... He will have his way, we will be eternally connected with him... and he so wishes for us to anticipate this... even now!

Friends, when we wait for the Lord, when we refuse to give up before the miracle happens, when we persevere... here is the promise (Isaiah 40:31) “But those who wait upon God get fresh strength. They spread their wings and soar like eagles, They run and don’t get tired, they walk and don’t lag behind”.

Today’s anthem contains these words, “Sometimes I feel discouraged and think my work’s in vain but then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again - there is a balm in Gilead!”.

Nathaniel teaches Steve to play the violin, Steve produces a sound “something like a butcher hears while working with live chickens”. But Nathaniel, the teacher, reassures Steve, the student, “It is frustrating but if you admire the violin, you will weather the frustrations”.

Our God admires each one of us whom he has made, whom he loves and for whom Christ has died... and He will weather the frustrations until we are joyfully, consistently, effectively... connected with him. Thanks be to God. Amen.