

“Plugged In”
 Brookfield Congregational Church
 September 12, 2010
 Text: Ruth 1:1-18

. . . birds do it, bees do it
 Even educated fleas do it
 Let's do it, let's fall in love

. . . the chimpanzees in the zoos do it,
 Some courageous kangaroos do it
 Let's do it, let's fall in love

Cole Porter's 1928 Broadway show tune, “Let's Do It,” is a light-hearted look at an activity that nearly all God's creatures do. To update Cole Porter a bit: birds, bees, chimps, kangaroos, people, even fleas—“hook up.”

We might not want to go so far as to propose that fleas and bees actually “fall in love” when they hook up. But we can say, without any fear of contradiction, that creatures throughout the animal kingdom, including bees, fleas, chimps and kangaroos, as well as those intelligent, two-legged, animals called human beings—animals of all sorts—join with others of their kind in hives or herds, flocks or droves, tribes or villages or cities—or churches.

It is rare for a species to prefer isolation over connection. Most animals—including us—are created for community.

In fact, the first chapters in the book of Genesis tell the story of God's creating human beings as a matched set, a pair, for it is “not good for a human to be alone,” to paraphrase God's comment on the subject.

This morning's scripture, the story of Ruth's decision to follow Naomi back to Judah has several themes. Certainly one of these themes is community. Naomi, devastated by the death of her husband and sons, plans to return alone to her homeland. She faces an uncertain future, for a woman's worth in Naomi's culture is measured by her family connections—and she has lost her connections through death.

But Ruth, out of love and loyalty, chooses to go with her mother-in-law. In words that resound across the centuries, Ruth declares to Naomi:

Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die— there will I be buried. May the LORD do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!

Ruth chooses connection and community—not only with Naomi, but also with Naomi's God. It is this three-way connection that defines God's great hope and intention for humankind. This

three-way connection, the scriptures promise us, can give us human beings our greatest blessing and meaning.

We are created for community with each other and with God—but increasingly, in the United States, we are choosing individualism over community, isolation over connection.

Typical of this option for individualism is the attitude of James, a Manhattan musician who lives alone. “I think it’s the best way to live,” he claims. “If you want to make a mess, you can make a mess. If you want to paint the walls a certain color, you can do it.” Privacy, James explains, has a special value in the big city, where people spend their days surrounded by other people.

James represents a trend. In 2007, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that there were more than 31 million single-person households in the U.S., representing roughly 27% of all households. Singles living alone now constitute the largest category of all household types—more common than households with just a couple; more common than households with one or two parents and one or more children.

An old Beatles’ song asks: “All the lonely people, where do they all come from?” The answer is that they come from all over. The culture of isolation represented by James the musician is not restricted to places like Manhattan. Isolation happens all over this land.

Such isolation is in sharp contrast to Norman Rockwell’s classic 1948 painting, “Freedom from Want.” You know this famous painting: it shows an extended family gathered around a table to celebrate a holiday feast. The room is filled with joy as the beaming grandparents place the perfectly roasted turkey on the table.

Fast-forward to today. While there are still families and friends who gather for holiday suppers, and while there are people like Rick who prefer the solitary life, there are also many people who go hungry in this country—not only for food, but for the kind of connection and community that Norman Rockwell’s painting represents.

Several years ago, a study published in the *American Sociological Review* reported a dramatic drop in the size of people’s core network of confidants—those close friends with whom you can talk freely about the important issues of your life.

This study found that the average American has just two close friends, compared with an average of three close friends in 1985. Those reporting no confidants at all jumped from 10 to 25 percent. One-fourth of all people in this country do not have a single close friend! And the number of people who reported a healthy circle of four or five friends has plunged to half of what it was 25 years ago.

People also reported that their friends seemed to be those with whom they lived—but, as we’ve seen, more and more people live alone. This implies that for many people, social connectedness has virtually disappeared. They don’t have friends; they have co-workers.

In his little book *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis envisioned hell as a place in which people were

forever moving farther away from one another. As we lose our sense of connection and community, this hellish vision of isolation is becoming a reality for more and more people.

Consider the fact that the U.S. has one of the highest rates of depression in the world. In contrast, Nigeria has one of the world's lowest rates.

How can this be?

The average standard of living in America is four times that of Nigeria. Nigeria is beset by a multitude of terrible social problems—including debilitating poverty, a serious AIDS epidemic and ongoing civil strife. And yet Nigeria has far less depression per capita than the U.S.

What do Nigerians have that Americans lack?

The main thing is a sense of community. Nigerians generally know they need one another and God. They don't have the means to live life solo, even if they have the inclination to do so. Consequently, they tend to have a sense of belonging that many Americans lack, and this provides them with a sense of satisfaction in life, despite the hardships they endure.

Studies show that personal happiness is more closely associated with the depth of one's relationships than it is with the depth of one's financial portfolio. And this is exactly what we'd expect given that we're created in the image of a God whose very nature is communal.

In her book, *Christian Doctrine*, author Shirley Guthrie observes: “As human beings created in the image of God, we can realize our distinctive individuality only in and for the sake of community with God and other people.”

We are designed for community. It's against our nature to be isolated. Isolation makes us miserable. Isolation does not allow us to become the all that God intends for each of us.

In his ministry, Jesus consistently modeled what three-fold communal life looks like. Though he was the Son of God—and therefore in a unique position as a human being—he didn't try to play the Lone Ranger. He had a network of friends, like Mary and Martha, on whom he could rely when he traveled. He banded with a group of 12 disciples and a number of women who traveled and ministered with him. And he chose three people (Peter, James and John) to form his most intimate circle of friends.

In his life and ministry, Jesus manifested the truth that individuals who live in community with God and each other will live the fullest expression of the life God intends for them.

In C.S. Lewis' vision of hell, people move into greater and greater isolation; in God's blessed kingdom, people move into greater and greater connection with one another and with God. That is what we see in Jesus' life and that is what we see in the life of Ruth and Naomi as they travel back to Judah and then work together to make a place for themselves in Judean society.

Like Jesus, like Ruth and Naomi, we all need people we are committed to loving and serving,

and who are committed to loving and serving us. We all need people who are close enough to us to notice when we're down and who care enough to lift us up. We all need people who can celebrate our triumphs with us and console us when we are defeated. We all need people who notice when we're headed in the wrong direction and who care enough to call us back.

Community is essential for our wholeness. That is why, even when we claim to want independence, we crave connection. We want to be plugged in.

This great longing for connection is symbolized by our children's attachment to text messaging. Our children are so hungry for community that they sleep with their cell phones and wake in the middle of the night to text one another.

While the virtual communities available to us through the cell phone and the computer help relieve some of our sense of loneliness and alienation, they do not take the place of face-to-face encounter with living, breathing human beings—confidants who can sit with us and hold our hand and hear our heartfelt needs.

Where can we find such a community in modern suburbia?

You know—suburbia: that place where we are lucky if we know the names of our neighbors; that place where we spend much of our time alone in our cars hurtling from event to event. Suburbia: that place we leave, sitting alone in our cars, to go to our jobs in the city where we spend much of our day isolated from our families and even from each other as we work alone in our individual cubicles.

Suburbia, that place where we shop in giant malls with anonymous clerks and bank at banks with anonymous tellers.

Where, in this anonymous and disjointed world, can we find the community of people with whom we can share the joys, sorrows, victories and defeats of ordinary life?

And if it's true that our community is complete only when it also includes God—where then, shall we find such a community? Will we find that three-fold community in the drive-through lane at McDonald's? E-mailing the person in the next cubicle at work? Will we even find that three-fold community watching our children and grandchildren play soccer on a Saturday afternoon? At a Packers' or Brewers' game? On the golf course?

Where will we find the community that allows us both to connect to one another and to God? Where will we find the community that has the potential to bless us with wholeness?

Where else if not here—here in this community of faith where we come together to worship God?

I want to suggest this morning that worship—while it is a worthwhile activity and has deep meaning for those of us who choose to be here on Sunday morning—worship is not the primary reason for being in church. I want to suggest this morning that the threefold community—the

community that includes you and me and God—that community is the primary reason for being here.

Worship, in other words, is not the end here. Worship is a means. It is intended to connect us more closely to God *and to one another* in the three-part community for which we were created.

Now if I'm right that church—more than any other part of our lives—has the greatest potential for providing us with the kind of community that can bring us to a state of wholeness—then it would seem that church might play a more central role in our lives than it does for most of us. We cannot create the blessed three-fold community in one hour a week. It's like trying to charge up your cell phone by plugging it in for a few minutes.

This is the point that Randy Frazee makes in his book, *The Connecting Church*. Scripture teaches us, Frazee writes, “that God intends the church, not to be one more bolt on the wheel of activity in our lives, but the very hub....”

Making church central in our lives is no Pollyanna version of life where everyone lives happily and no one ever gets angry. Ruth and Naomi did not always see eye to eye. Even Jesus and his followers had their moments of mutual frustration and misunderstanding.

But the promise is there for us as it was for Naomi and Ruth, for Mary and Martha, for Peter and James and John and Jesus: if we plug into the community of faith, we will grow into the people God wants us to be.

If this church—Brookfield Congregational—has the potential to be the community where you and I can be brought more and more into a state of wholeness, then doesn't it seem like a good idea to place it closer to the center of our lives, not on the edges? Doesn't it seem like a good idea to make it a first thought, not an afterthought in our lives?

With Ruth, don't we want to say to one another:

Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.

...and that brings me back to the Cole Porter song with which we began. Birds and bees and fleas, chimps and kangaroos may “hook up.” But only human beings can be plugged in to a three-fold community of love with God and each other. If we want to be the community that God envisions for us, let's do it...let's fall in love.

Amen.