

Veterans, vines, sheep, and bones.... Connectivity

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Opening sequence of 'Saving Private Ryan' and the landing of US troops in Normandy, 1944. In opening minutes of the movie, we see a band of soldiers, facing fierce enemy fire, as they arrive in France, on a mission to save Private Ryan.

One thing you learn if you have ever been in the armed forces, is the importance of teamwork. You are watching out for your comrades. They are watching out for you. You also learn the chain of command is of paramount importance, and that personal wishes are to be sublimated to the orders that come down from HQ.

On Friday, Veterans Day, we gathered to commemorate those men and women who served our country. Many of whom did not return. And those that did return, carry the memories of war with them to this day. They also carry with them memories of times together with their unit, their company, their brigade. Memories of their friends, who supported them through the bad times and the good. A band of brothers, whose ties will never be broken. They served together. Survived together. Grieved and celebrated... together.

Fast forward now to the New Testament reading from John, read this morning. John 15:5 *'I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.'*

The Psalm we read together earlier in the service, Psalm 23, is undeniably the best known, the best loved Psalm of them all. It talks of Jesus as the shepherd, and that we are the sheep.

Our connection with the shepherd is just as critical to our lives, as the branches are to the vine.

Without the shepherd, the sheep will not survive. But now, there is an extra element. The shepherd is willing to lay down his life for the sheep. Just as the soldiers in the first vignette, were willing to lay down their lives for each other.

And Jesus talks about this. Gospel of John.... 15:12. *'My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.'* Just as Jesus laid down his life for his friends, for us all.

Jesus also takes this idea of teamwork one major step further. He says, **if you do not work together, and do not stay connected to the One who made you, you can do nothing.** Once you are cut off from your Creator, you will no longer be supported, no

longer sustainable. Just as flowers, once they are cut and brought inside the house, lose their ability to thrive on their own.

Today, the theme of my message is one word. Connectivity. You may have heard the phrase the 'The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.' These words are attributed to Aristotle. A famous Greek philosopher who lived approximately 400 years before the birth of Christ.

It's the idea that separately, items have intrinsic value. A pair of socks is a way of keeping your feet warm and cozy. If you are living up in Alaska, a pair of socks is a good thing. But if you go outside wearing just a pair of socks, you are not destined to survive. If you add thick pants, a warm parka, hat, mittens, scarf and boots... you now have a totally warm person, capable of chopping wood, and living comfortably, without risk of frostbite!

But all the items of clothing, together, mean far more than just the individual items. By themselves, each item has value. Together, they represent a collective value, greater than the intrinsic individual value.

Individually, each of those soldiers could not have located and saved Private Ryan. Collectively, they could.

Individually, the branches of a grapevine cannot produce a harvest. Collectively they can.

Individually, a sheep is likely to end up stuck in a thicket, or upside down and unable to get up. Collectively, a flock of sheep, under the control of the shepherd, is a valuable commodity.

Which brings me to bones. Bare bones. The bones that Ezekiel saw in his vision. Ezekiel had a lot of visions, many of them fascinating... but perhaps the best known is the Valley of the Bones, in chapter 37 of the book of Ezekiel, where through the spirit of god, those bones came back to life... the foot bone connected to the ankle bone, the ankle bone connected to the knee bone. Etc. Etc.

Here is a connectivity that delights our imaginations. Dancing skeletons, brought back to life by the power of God.

And these bones bring also a new way of looking at connectivity. We already have talked about staying alive by being connected. We have talked about the sum of the whole being greater than the parts... but now we have the vision of being brought to life by being connected.. .not just kept alive. Brought to life, by the Spirit of God, who was willing to let his own Son die, that others might live, and be brought to life by breathing in the breath of God.

Connectivity is a wonderful thing. I remember when my computer didn't work a while back, and I called Time Warner, and the man at the end of the line said to me... do you

have connectivity? And I said. No. That's why I am talking to you. If I was connected to the Internet, I wouldn't need to be talking to you.

You see, as Christians we know we need to be connected. We totally understand that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. When we come together on a Sunday morning, we feel the power of fellowship, the power of faith, and we feel connected to God. Which is why we come! If we didn't feel a benefit. We wouldn't be here

But there are a lot of people out there, who don't know that they need to be connected. They think that life is supposed to be full of stress, and decisions, and that they are the only person that can look after themselves. They don't feel connected at all. Which is why, we as a church, as a congregation, need to reach out to others, to invite them to become part of the exciting journey of faith that we all are on, together.

And just as every soldier is important,
every branch is important to the vine,
every sheep is a precious part of the flock
every bone is important to the skeleton...

So we too as a congregation, come together and acknowledge that every one of us inside the building, and every one of us outside this building, is important to God. Equally important to God.

We are not called to be exclusive. We are called to be inclusive... because the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. The body of Christ, active in this world, us... is greater in its influence, in its impact on this world, when it opens up its arms, and says come on in.

One thing in recent months, that encouraged me to turn my TV off, was the fact that instead of lifting up, we seemed to take far more time putting down. And we are in the lifting up business.... Not the putting down business.

Remember my opening comments about Saving Private Ryan?

I said 'One thing you learn if you have ever been in the armed forces, is the importance of teamwork. You are watching out for your comrades. They are watching out for you. You also learn the chain of command is of paramount importance, and that personal wishes are to be sublimated to the orders that come down from HQ.'

Well the orders that come down from our HQ, come from God. Through Scripture and the life and teachings of God's Son. And the orders are straightforward. Love. Do not judge. Love. Put others first and yourself last. Love. Forgive seventy seven times not just the once. Love.

We are part of God's army on earth. In fact, the Salvation Army founded by General Booth, that was their intention, to march forward, onward Christian soldiers, as a powerful instrument of peace and love. The work they have done all over the world in

the past 100 years is outstanding, and continues to this day. Fueled not by division, or judgment, or criticism. Fueled by love.

Connectivity will keep us focused on the greater good.

Because when the unit flourishes, the soldier flourishes. When the vine is strong, the branches bear much fruit. When the shepherd is the Good Shepherd, the sheep get to lie down in green pastures, and when the Spirit of God breathes life into old bones, they get up and dance and sing.

Here in this congregation we have connectivity, but we always need to think outside these walls.

Because walls sometimes keep people out. Those very people who feel disconnected from God. The ones who don't know they need to be connected to thrive.

We have to keep thinking of ways to include. It's an exciting challenge for each and every one of us to consider. Each day there

is an opportunity for each of us to make a difference. Each day there is an opportunity for each of us to help someone feel connected, to help someone feel accepted.

To help someone. Just as other people have helped us.

That is the nature of faith. We are in this together.

We are soldiers in God's army.

We are the branches, and Christ is the vine.

We are the sheep of His pasture.

We are the bones that make up the skeleton of the body of Christ.

We are together, and the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

Connectivity. It's important.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, in a time of vulnerability, and anxiety for many among us, help us to be Your voice of compassion and love.

As our country moves forward in to a new chapter, help each one of us to come alongside, to accept, and to love.

Help us to be inclusive. As we are all members of God's family, help us to stay connected, through our love for You, and for each other.

In Jesus' precious name we pray. **Amen.**