

# Connecting the Dots

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**Exodus 33:12-23; I Thessalonians 1:1-10; St. Matthew 22:15-22**

Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost – October 16, 2011

Happy Laity Sunday!

Will you pray with me? May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

When I was in college, I decided that I needed to get into the “real world” to help figure out what I was going to do with my life. So I got a job with a temporary agency. The agency would call and say, “Tomorrow you need to report to this company and answer phones” or “Next week you will work every day for this company filing papers.”

Well, one day the agency called and said, “Tomorrow you are going to work for the English Muffin company in Buckeystown. You don’t need to dress up; you can wear jeans and tennis shoes.”

How fun, I thought! I love English muffins! Maybe they even kept warm English muffins out for the employees to snack on while they worked!

So I showed up the next day, excited and ready to file or answer phones or whatever the English Muffin company had in mind. Well, not quite. Because when I arrived, they said, “Here’s your hair net and your mask. Go suit up and report over there,” to where a group of burly men were standing.

Ummmm? This didn’t look like filing. No, in fact, it turned out that my English muffin job was as a substitute janitor on the factory floor. This might have been fine. I can sweep, and I can clean. But my main job was to operate one of the huge vacuum cleaners with a giant tube that sucked up English muffin flour dust from the conveyer belts. And the main problem with that is that the suction was so strong that I could not possibly pull the tube loose when it attached to something! I would be balancing on these little metal stairs that went up to the conveyer belt tracks, pulling my hardest to break the suction while trying not to go flying across the factory floor. On that day, I am afraid that the English muffin factory lost money on me since the other employees had to spend the whole day helping me. And yes, I only lasted one day. I came home white with flour

dust head to toe and couldn't bear to eat an English muffin for a very long time.

I call that experience my English muffin moment. A moment, when I realized, without a doubt, that this was not the right place for me. An English muffin moment is when things do not work out like we had planned!

I think that Moses had an English Muffin Moment when he came down from the mountain in last week's reading. He found that Aaron and the others had decided to melt all of their gold to create a golden calf to worship. What were they thinking?

Fast forward to this week's reading, and Moses faces another challenge. He says to God, "You have been telling me to lead these people," but he is frustrated because he still doesn't know the details. You've got to love Moses. He is so up front with God about his concerns. He basically says, God, I want to know you are with me. I want to know this path is chosen, or don't even send me.

I think this is a question that we lay people can really relate to: Lord, are you guiding me? What do you want me to do next? Please God, could you just tell me what to do and let me know that I am on the right path?

As lay people, we know the United Methodist Church asks for our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service and our witness. But the underlying question is, how do I know what God wants me to do, not just in this church building, but with my whole life? To me, this is one of the most profound questions we face.

Fortunately, today's Exodus passage gives us some guidance in two of God's interactions with Moses. I'm especially grateful for this reading on Laity Sunday, when we recognize that God has a plan for every person here.

The first moment comes when God responds to Moses' demands by saying, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."

When you and I are trying to find our way in life, we can totally focus on ourselves and what **we** we want. "What should **I** do with **my** life?" It's easy to become self-absorbed. But our first step should be to consciously ask for God's presence on our journey. Our question should be, "What would **God** have me do with the life **he** has given me?" We must remember that it is God's presence with us that can guide us and can actually give us peace along the way.

In the book, God Wants You To Be Happy: From Self-Help to God's Help, the author Jonathan Morris says that he cringes when he sees people with their heads buried in self-help books. He believes you can only get so far on your own. Yes, God helps those who help themselves, those who show initiative and hard work. But, he adds, "You have been made in the image and likeness of God, and your soul will be restless until it rests in him and his plan for you."

So after we have asked for God's presence on our journey, then what? Again, we can take a cue from Moses, who asks God for something else. Moses says to God, Show me your glory.

This is actually an amazing request to me, because it certainly seems like Moses got to see more of God's glory than anyone else, from the burning bush to the parting of the Red Sea, to the manna coming down from heaven. However, don't we also wish for lots of signs from God?

God's response is very interesting. He says, "You cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live." But what he does do is make arrangements for Moses to see his reflected glory. God says, "While my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by, then I shall take away my hand and you shall see my back."

Friends, I believe God offers us that same opportunity today. In our quest to figure out where we go next, I believe we can see God's **reflected** glory if we look for it. In seeing God's back, we can begin to recognize when we are being pointed in a particular direction.

But what does God's reflected glory look like? Many have described it as a whisper or a feeling. The problem is that our busy and overscheduled lives can leave little room to listen. We need our hearts need to be wide open and ready.

Just look at the start of Methodism itself. In 1738, John Wesley had a profound religious experience at a church meeting on Aldersgate Street in London. If we had more time this morning, we could explore all of the events that led to, as he said in his own words, his heart feeling strangely warmed that night. This summer, when the choir and orchestra went to London, we actually got to see the plaque commemorating this event. Within a year of Wesley's experience, he had founded the Methodist Society of England, and built the New Room, which is now the oldest Methodist chapel in the world. We were lucky on tour to not only visit that chapel in Bristol, but actually to have the youth sing there,

which you can see on Ryan Celli's wonderful video.

Seeing God's back means we get to see his reflected glory in us. It gives us the chance to see how all of the pieces ultimately come together, leading us in a certain direction.

Last week, as you probably know, Steve Jobs died. As the co-founder of Apple, Inc. and Pixar Animation Studios, his death received enormous attention. One item circulating about him was a commencement speech he gave at Stanford University. The speech reflects his views of both the failures and successes in his life. He describes his very public and devastating firing from Apple, saying "What had been the focus of my entire adult life was gone." But he adds, "I didn't see it then, but being fired from Apple was the best thing that could have ever happened to me."

He also explains, that earlier, when he dropped out of college, he was able to take a calligraphy course. He says, "None of this had even a hope of any practical application in my life. But 10 years later, when we were designing the first Macintosh computer, it all came back to me. We designed it all into the Mac.... the first computer with beautiful typography. If I had never dropped out, I would have never dropped in on this calligraphy class, and personal computers might not have the wonderful [fonts and typefaces that] they do. Of course it was impossible to connect the dots looking forward when I was in college. But it was very, very clear looking backwards 10 years later. Again, you can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future. You have to trust in something...."

As lay people and as Christians, our something to trust in is God. I believe that every one of us has stories of dots being connected. So today, we can start right we are, with our own failures and our own English muffin moments, our own hopes and uncertainties. Like Moses, we can ask God to be present and to show us his glory.

In closing, do you know that today it is still possible to buy those wonderful "old-fashioned" connect-the-dots books for kids as well as to download connect-the-dots apps for the IPAD? Whatever the method, on Laity Sunday, I love the image of God revealing these dots to us and us doing our very best to draw the connections between them, all to create a beautiful picture of our lives. Thanks be to God for his presence and his glory. Amen.