

Power to Make Connections
A Sermon on Luke 12:13-21 by the Rev. Philip Major
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During the past nine weeks I travelled through five countries in Europe. I visited museums and cathedrals, parks and gardens. I rode my bicycle along tiny streets and mountain roads. I walked up and around and beneath mountains in Switzerland and Italy.

One week ago, I climbed the highest mountain of my life: the Schilthorn, in the center of the Swiss Alps. Climbing this mountain was a sort of symbol for my nine-week sabbatical journey. When you are high up, on a mountain, one can look out in many directions and see the details and geography that are out of sight down below, where most of us live, down in the valleys and on the fertile plains of life. I spent that day, and many other days, climbing up the mountains. After many hours I came to the top. I could see a very long distance. I saw a wide view of the world.

I want to show you a little bit of what I saw, so I made some copies of one of my photographs which we've inserted into your leaflet. Last Sunday, I saw the panorama of mountains in front of me, which you see in this photograph. It was a beautiful view. But last Sunday I was also taking in a bigger view of something more beautiful to me; the people I met during my nine week journey. If you look on the back you will see a few of the people I met.

I had many conversations with people I had never met before, and will likely never meet again. One of the main things I learned, or perhaps remembered, is the power of simple human conversation. One of our greatest powers is the power to make a connection with another person.

This is the power you are carrying around with you every day. It is a power that each one of us has. It is not something you need to worry about being good at. You just listen to others and share your thoughts with others. As I discovered when talking with people who spoke very little English, you don't have to have a lot of words, because the power of connection is all about your intentions.

This is what I experienced with hundreds of people, speaking in Italian, German and English. I could understand the basic intention of the other person, even if we could not understand many of the words spoken. Especially after my sabbatical, I am convinced that this power of connection is strongest and clearest among common people who spend their lives working and doing the normal things that people do. I am convinced that this power of connection is most accessible to those who are not famous. I talked with hundreds of people in Italy, France, England, Germany and Switzerland. Not a single one of these people is a famous person.

Some of my favorite examples of the power of connection happened in a place very few people have even heard of: Garfagnana. Garfagnana is a region in Tuscany, in Central Italy. Garfagnana is a river valley located between the Apuan and Appenine Mountain ranges in Tuscany. The region is not very accessible, since it is surrounded by mountains on three sides.

Garfagnana is not a famous place. Many *Italians* have never heard of it. The people I met in Garfagnana are more or less the opposite of famous. They are not seen on television. There are not stories about them in lots of magazines or newspapers. As I discovered when planning my trip to Garfagnana, there are very few books about Garfagnana. Many of the people my age in Garfagnana spend their days tending their gardens on the slopes of the mountains.

I had wonderful conversations with my taxi driver, Riccardo. I was the first American he had ever met. I had long, surprising conversations with the innkeepers and other guests at the tiny mountainside inns. My conversations with a woman named Vincenza were some of my favorites. I stayed a few nights in a Bed and Breakfast that was run by Vincenza's son. Vincenza is about 80 years old. Vincenza spoke not a single word of English to me.

I arrived at their Bed and Breakfast earlier than expected, at about one o'clock. My room was not ready, but they welcomed me to sit in their back yard. After a few minutes Vincenza came out to see me. I could not understand everything she said, but she said the word, *pranzare*, which means 'to eat lunch'. I nodded and replied, 'Si, grazie.' A few minutes later Vincenza returned with a simple plate of pasta,

covered with fresh tomatoes, fresh basil, olive oil and a little of the Pecorino Romano cheese made in Garfagnana. An hour later I was cleaning out my pack and came into the house with a small bag of garbage. Vincenza greeted me at the kitchen door. However, she insisted that I use and understand the Italian word for garbage *spazzatura* before allowing me to deposit my garbage in her garbage can. Vincenza's intention to make a connection is like a superpower. Within a few hours in her house I trusted Vincenza like a favorite aunt or grandmother.

You have this power also. You have this power to make strong connections with other people. It is the power to build trust. You might not even think much about this power you possess to make connections with other people, until you encounter a person who has lost the power to make connections.

There was a story in the New York Times a few days ago that illustrated the perils of becoming disconnected from other people and from reality. It was the story of a wealthy businessman in Kentucky. The man had amassed a great fortune through sales of liquor in his liquor store near Lexington, Kentucky. Eventually he became famous. He was elected as a representative in the Kentucky legislature.

The rich man was quite fearful after Barak Obama was elected president. He was quite afraid that the election of the first black president in the United States would bring a period of civil unrest. He was afraid and he wanted to be safe and he wanted his family to be safe. So he began construction of a 14,000 square foot, \$6.5 million mansion, with a 2000 square foot concrete bunker in the basement. The mansion was set in the middle of his enormous country estate. He thought he would be safe there.

The enormous estate with the hardened bunker in the basement attracted the attention of a man in Ohio. The man in Ohio decided it would be a great challenge to break into the mansion. So he planned for weeks and assembled his firearms and studied photographs of the rich man's mansion. In February he climbed up onto a second floor balcony, and broke into the rich man's mansion. He broke through a set of glass doors and killed the rich man's daughter.

This is a story of greed and disconnection. The rich man was afraid and he was selfish. The rich man stopped making connections with other people. The rich man came to be so disconnected from reality that he imagined that the election of Barak Obama would lead to a period of violence and unrest.

The opposite was true. During President Obama's two terms all sorts of crime rates, including violent crimes, fell significantly. According to FBI statistics, America was a safer place during the eight years of President Obama's leadership than during the previous eight years.

The rich man was selfish and afraid and he became disconnected from reality. The rich man lost the power to make connections with other people. This is what Jesus is pointing to in his teaching for his disciples. *Be on your guard against all kinds of greed.* Then Jesus tells a parable that is almost like the story of the wealthy businessman in Kentucky. Both of the rich men have lost connections with other people. Both of the rich men have much more than they need, yet they are possessed by their greed. Both of the rich men experience tragedy.

It is not by chance that both of these stories are stories about rich men. Those who are rich have an extra challenge in life, which is to stay connected with reality and to stay connected with other people. If you are rich you don't have to make connections with other people. This leads to more selfishness and greed. Sometimes it even leads to having more fear.

Let us find strength in this great power God has given us, which is the power to make connections with one another. It is the power to build trust through conversations and interactions.

I rejoice to be back with you in this fellowship dedicated to the task of being united. I rejoice to be back with those who treat me as a brother. I rejoice to be back in this place of connection and community. It is our mission to act as one body, working together as the fingers work together to grasp the single cup we share during communion. It is our mission to be connected with one another as brothers and sisters.