

Carleen Gerber
 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Texts: I Corinthians 12:12-14, 27; I John 3:18-24
 October 2, 2022

A Communion Meditation: In Praise of the Lowly Spider

This summer, on a particularly foggy morning, our lower yard was covered in what seemed to be hundreds of delicately shimmering spider webs. The fog enabled that fantastic bit of natural wonder to be highlighted by tiny drops of moisture, so that the emerging summer sun sparkled as if each water droplet was a prism. And I stood still for a long time, captivated by the sight. Whatever anxieties the unfolding day might portend, for a time I was nurtured and upheld by nature's beauty. To borrow a line from Wendell Berry:

“For a time I rested in the grace of the world and was free”

Now – if you are ever bored on some rainy day, and sitting at your computer, I encourage you to Google “spider webs.” The Smithsonian has a wonderful offering called “How a spider builds a web.” Check it out!

Here's some of what I've learned:

Spider webs are incredibly strong- sometimes stretching over many feet and able to withstand significant assault. Scientists have tried to duplicate the spider's silk, which is renowned for its tensile strength, but so far have not succeeded.

And spiders start with the long, long threads that form the connection from one central point to a far-distant place. I'll call them “long- lines.” Then they work to fashion the shorter threads that connect the long-lines. Are you with me?

Raise your hand if, at this moment, you're thinking this is, so far, a little bizarre for a sermon text.

The real inspiration for this sermon on World-Wide Communion Sunday is the world map representation you see in front of you this morning on an easel. Our map shows all the “long-lines” of mission connection, stretching across the world, that our congregation has created over the past 40 years. And I want to thank Tom Sherer, and his love of geography, for making this map possible.

Hopefully you can begin to see why the illustration of a spider's web came to my mind.

This church community has developed what I think is a fairly unique path in mission work that has held us in communion with other places around the world for over four decades. Our first mission partnership was with the people of the Green Grass community on the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation in South Dakota. Our board of missions, in a move prescient of all that would follow, decided that we should NOT ONLY send money to people in need; but we should try to know the people we seek to help - know them as friends and fellow members of God's Kingdom.

So in the summer of 1985 the first mission pioneers from our congregation made the long journey to South Dakota. And it was there that we began to discover the many blessings that come when we stretch our long-lines far, and make friends with other places, other cultures and other faith traditions. I've lost count now, but last I knew there were well over 400 members of our church community who've travelled those 1800 miles to South Dakota and back home again.

Historically, Christian mission work was carried on in a much different manner. And it's a history that sends a shudder down my spine.

It is no accident that the first major thrust for "Christianizing the world" originated in England, during the early years of the Industrial Revolution, so between the mid 1700's and the early 1800's. Frankly, England needed more natural resources to fuel her appetite for industrial progress. And that appetite for resources coupled well with Christian missionary zeal. The London Missionary Society was born, ultimately sending missionaries all across the globe. Think of David Livingston and his journey into what he called "darkest Africa." Or Captain James Cook and his conquest of the Pacific Islands. For many, if not most, of those early mission expeditions, there was a strong sense that the Christian religion was going to "save" the so-called "heathens." And that's the part that sends the shudders down my spine.

Looking back on those historical missionary quests, we can see clearly that, while intentions might have been otherwise, the damage to cultures and societies and peoples worldwide was severe. Studying at the University of South Africa in the 1990's, I heard from professors there that the ultimate goal of all Christian mission should be – must be - pluralism – an affirmation of the differences and wonder-filled complexities of all the world's religions – including the indigenous religions that early zealous missionaries were most rabid to squelch. For me, it was a theological emancipation proclamation. And it has made the mission work of this particular church community all the more precious and wonderful.

The longest of our "long-lines" in mission has been our work in the resettlement of refugees, which began way back around 1980. Initially, it was three families from Laos who brought a cultural and religious bounty to us. They helped us understand their faith – which happened to be Buddhism. They invited us to join with them in their festive New Year's celebrations. And we learned to love their offerings of foods we'd never experienced before. Long before they opened the Morning Glory restaurant in Old Lyme, we knew the Patannah's were good cooks. And their youngsters helped put this town on the map in state-wide soccer championships.

But so it is with other refugee resettlings we've been blessed to share with other families. We've learned more than we ever knew about the peoples and cultures of Burundi and Rwanda, Burma and Syria, the DRC and Afghanistan. We've shared in sumptuous gourmet smorgasbords. We've heard their stories and shared their sorrows and their joys – and they've shared in ours. We have been richly blessed by the cultural and religious diversity of which we've been privileged to be a part.

But like the spider web, our lives in community cannot simply rely on "long lines" for their integrity. As I told you earlier, after attaching the long lines, the spider diligently returns to stitch the small connectional lines that lend strength and stability to the web. And so it is with all our mission work here.

The integrity of our web of missions depends on countless connections – big and small - that serve to strengthen our work. And the closer you get to the center of our web- to this church community – the more numerous the threads of connection will be.

Our mission board focuses a great deal of our energy and money on agencies in New London County that serve the dispossessed, the homeless, and the hungry. When people from our church prepare dinner for the New London Community Meal Site, we have a chance to interact with folks there in the city; and their lives, at least for a brief moment, intersect with

ours. The Ladies Who Stitch have now sewn over 400 large, sturdy cloth bags which are given to clients of the Homeless Hospitality Center of New London – bags that allow the guests of the center to carry what remains of their precious belongings with them as they shelter. The bags are a representation of a fabric of connection that is both precious and vital.

When our Green Grass partnership committee prepares boxes of supplies to ship to South Dakota to boost morale and offer provision in the cold of a South Dakota winter, the web of connection is fortified. So too, the outreach of our Tribal Crafts work helps to fortify that precious web of connection.

When our newest refugees from Afghanistan arrived here in Old Lyme about one year ago, it was the Hamu family, resettled from Syria, that cooked the meal that greeted them on the night of their arrival to their home on Roger's Lake. The web of connection was fortified.

And so it is with our Tree of Life partnership. In three weeks we'll be blessed by the presence right here in our community of folks who live in the city of Hebron in the West Bank. We'll share- even if only briefly, in their life stories; and the web of connection will be fortified. Just as it's fortified with every bottle of olive oil that's sold – the proceeds of which help a young person in the occupied territory to attend university. The web of missions is precious and its precarious. But like the web of the spider it is strong.

When Bishop Paul Verryn, our partner in missions for over 35 years, was with us this past summer, he facilitated a fascinating connection in our web of missions. South Africa, like much of the world, is suffering from critical food insecurity, exacerbated by a grievously changing climate. He made it possible for people working on agricultural projects in some of the poorest settlements in South Africa to tour – by video – the community gardens that help to sustain the Shoreline Soup Kitchens right here in our area. It was a beautiful thing to watch the faces of the South Africans who joined us that day on zoom. And we here in New England saw something inspiring and new (at least to me). We were introduced to an irrigation system that works on a nearly closed loop. Rain is collected in a holding tank into which fish are living. The fish produce waste that fertilizes the crops during irrigation. That water sifts through the soil and ultimately is returned to the fish tank – and so on goes the loop that may be a critical piece of how to grow crops in a climate ravaged by droughts.

To borrow liberally from Wendell Berry again, for a few moments that day I was held in the “grace of the world” - suspended in amazement at human ingenuity, and the potential of the natural world to endure through assault. And the web of connection was fortified.

It is true that the global pandemic has made it hard to travel the miles and miles that connect us with our partner communities in other parts of the world. But we are trying to re-envision ways to make those journeys- and ways to broaden and strengthen our connections. Help us think this through, if you're so inclined – and share with us your new ideas.

It is surely true that some of the most stabilizing and life-giving connections in our faith community's web of life are made right here- among us - as we work together to fashion a kingdom of peace and justice. Whether you sing in the choir, or knit with others on Monday mornings, or cook a casserole to be served in New London, or volunteer at the White Elephant Sale, or serve on a board or committee here in our church – you are fortifying the web of connection. And that web is life-giving in so many ways.

This morning, as you partake in the sacrament of Holy Communion you will be doing so along with people the world over who are observing World Communion Sunday. Right about now – the last service of the day is about to begin at Central Methodist Church in downtown Johannesburg, South Africa. We – and they – are sharing in communion.

In closing, I'd like to offer you one more precious thread in the web. We heard earlier, in the children's sermon, about a wisdom that comes from the indigenous tribes of Southern Africa. It's called the Spirit of Ubuntu. Ubuntu is the belief that the suffering of any one of us diminishes and jeopardizes the shared humanity of all of us. Essentially it's what Jesus meant when he said...." You must love your neighbor as you love yourself."

As the cup is shared world-wide this day, it's the spirit of Ubuntu, and the wisdom of what Jesus called the most important commandment that connects us all. Amen.