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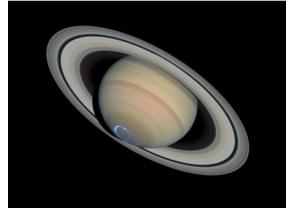
Encounter Christ...Grow in faith...Love as Christ loved...Tell the Story

Life on Saturn

I recently attended a continuing education event at Carol Joy Holling. One of the topics we discussed was the status of community in America. Marc Dunkelman is a journalist and author who wrote a book called *The Vanishing Neighbor: The Transformation of American Community*.

Dunkelman outlined three distinct eras of community in American history.

In the pre—industrial agrarian era multiple generations of family often lived and worked together. Social patterns were centered around the towns and cities people lived in or near. Most people didn't end up very far from where they were born.



The second era reached its peak in the 1950's. Industrialization and urbanization, as well as changes in transportation shifted the social patterns. People lived in smaller nuclear families, corporations became the way to organize business, and people didn't have to live as close to the place where they made their living.

The third era is now...it coincides with what has been called the information age.

Dunkelman's main thesis is that the shift into the third era has profoundly affected our relationships. He uses the image of the planet Saturn with three rings. In this image, you are the planet. Each ring represents a range of relationships you might have...so closest relationships are the inner ring, middle ring is a little less close and the third ring is made up of more distant relationships...acquaintances.

In the pre-industrial era, the multiple generations of the family were the inner ring. The middle ring consisted primarily of neighbors, the people you went to church with, and people you interacted with at shops and businesses. The outer ring would be very casual acquaintances. In small towns and rural areas, there likely wasn't much of an outer ring.

In the second era, the industrial age, the nuclear family and maybe a few close friends occupied the inner ring. The second ring was occupied by extended family, neighbors, fellow church members, the Kiwanis club, the Country club and so on. The third ring again, was made up of acquaintances. So there were some shifts, but in general, relationships were organized according to the same pattern during both eras.

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In this third age, Dunkelman argues, there has been a complete change. The inner ring has changed. Many young adults live longer with their parents. There are helicopter parents. Families come home from work and school and cocoon themselves. They buy goods online. All these serve to minimize contact with those who would have previously been in their middle ring, so it has shrunk drastically.

The third ring, via social media, has expanded dramatically. We can and often do connect with people who live far away much more often than the people who live next door to us. Someone we haven't talked to since we graduated from high school together suddenly becomes someone whose life we think we know about. We have hundreds, even thousands of Facebook friends or Instagram followers, but don't know a thing about the family next door.

The middle ring has shrunk in American society to a point where for some people it barely exists.

Most institutions and all civic and religious institutions sit solidly in that disappearing middle ring.

Dunkelman says the loss of this middle ring has had a profoundly polarizing effect. It was in this sphere of coworkers, extended family, shopkeepers, fellow church members and so on that we had to come face to face with people who were in a different social class, who had different backgrounds, different beliefs and different political affiliations.

With no middle ring, what we have is our little cocoon at home and our social media profiles where our arguments are devoid of the face to face contact that can mute the high passions and we destroy real connection. Or we hide posts or unfriend someone when we can't stand it anymore. We can in effect, create our own bubble where nobody we encounter really thinks much differently than we do.

The church in this age is called to work in all three rings. We minister to families in that inner ring, and we need to reach out digitally to those we may never actually meet.

But what about that middle ring? Does this ring true for you or do you still have a solid middle ring?

What's lost in our society without it? And how might the church...and by that I mean its people...become the backbone of a revived yet very 21st Century middle ring? What would that even look like?

I don't have all the answers. But I think they are the questions that will help shape our future and the future of the church...maybe even the world.

In Christ's peace,

Pastor Kris

February Calendar

February 3	9:00 am—Worship with Holy Communion 9:45 am—Sunday school
February 10	8:00 am—Zion council 9:00 am—Worship
February 17	9:00 am—Worship 9:45 am—Sunday school
February 24	Tentative—9:30 Worship at South Haven

Bible Question of the Week

When I read the Bible, I struggle to get anything out of it. An easy-to-read translation helps, but I still struggle to get anything out of it.

Like a lot of aspects of faith, “getting something out of it” can be hard to define. It may not seem that you're getting anything out of it, but it's quite possible it has nonetheless shaped you over time. If you, in your own imperfect way, find yourself drawn to know Jesus better or seek to be more kind and loving to others, then perhaps you've gotten more out of it than you thought.

We may do a summer series on how to read the Bible, but here's a couple things that can help.

First of all, start with the gospels. As Lutherans, we read the rest of scripture through the lens of Christ. What you're really after is a relationship with Jesus that can shape and transform you. That won't happen with a single reading session...it happens over time, like all relationships. As you read, notice what Jesus is doing or saying. Imagine yourself in the situation...what would you be feeling or thinking. What questions do you have? How is the situation like something in our world? What would Jesus have to say about the current situation?

Another way is to practice *lectio divina*. I described this in my December newsletter. It's a way of listening for how the Spirit is speaking to you through scripture. It begins by reading scripture and taking note of a word or phrase that stands out. There's then a meditative process to discern where that word or phrase might connect with your life. This requires no special knowledge of biblical history, theology, etc. Reading scripture in some meditative form probably has the most impact because it helps shape our relationship with Jesus. But as I said, that happens over time.