

Connecting People to the Congregation
Phil 2:1-4, Romans 11:13, 17-18, John 15:1-17

Well brothers and sisters, back in 2017 you may have heard about Dr. Sergio Canavero, an Italian neurosurgeon, who announced he planned to conduct the world's first human head transplant... if he can find a willing patient whose head needs a new body and 150 doctors and nurses who can assist him in the 36 hour long procedure, and someone who is willing to be a body donor...

In reaction to this announcement, the scientific and medical community has admitted that while technologically such a surgery is possible in theory, in reality the practicalities and uncertainties involved make it next to impossible.

Which means I will not have the option of undergoing surgery to be able to look like this...

But all joking and medical science fiction aside friends – the idea of a body having a new head is not a new or recent idea.

Let me read Ephesians 4:15 for you with this in mind: *“And we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.”*

The Apostle Paul pictures those who believe in Jesus Christ as being joined together and being connected to Jesus in the same way that a head gets a new body – in this case a weak and immature one – that starts to mature and grow strong once it has been connected to its new head.

Can you envision this picture? Do you envision yourself in relationship to Jesus Christ and to others who believe in Him in this way? Growing from immaturity into maturity...

Of course that path from immaturity to maturity is part of how we keep the blessing going... and as we have looked at how we do that over the past month by continuing to connect to the community, building credible connections, what it means to connect people to Christ in worship, we need to know that the blessing continues as we become the mature body of Jesus Christ as our head.

And that maturity happens as we are connected to Christ as our head – but also as we are connected to His body, His Church, and specifically this Congregation at Valleyview.

So let's look at how the Blessing continues through the process of Connecting People to the Congregation.

Now, you may have heard statements like *“your church may be great at attracting new visitors and unchurched people – but if they don't make some meaningful connections with people within the first few months, they will stop attending.”*

And this is true... and probably all the more difficult to do under our present circumstance.

So that only emphasizes the importance of why God currently has us focusing on GOING OUT and connected to people in the community and building credibility with them – because its going to be a while because people start to connect to us through being here in person.

But in preparation for what comes after this phase of going out in order to bring people in let us understand what needs to happen when someone begins to attend church.

Otherwise we won't know how to help them progress in growing as disciples and moving on to maturity - and they end up a mature head – Jesus – but keeping a child's body...

Now I should also clarify that simply having good connections to a congregation does not guarantee that you are personally progressing or maturing in your own discipleship, or that you are developing connections to Christ.

In mainline Christian denominations such as ours it is possible for people to have been connected to congregations for many many years and somehow not actually be connected to Christ?

I remember an experience in one church where I served as a youth pastor where I helped out with the annual Turkey Dinner, and that event introduced me to at least fifty 'new'

people who had been “connected” to that church for years – but I would never ever see showing up on a Sunday for worship.

Somehow the head transplant hadn’t really taken for them.

But even showing up to attend worship doesn’t necessarily mean people are connecting to Christ and maturing as disciples – even as a minister.

A colleague of mine shared with me his experience of hearing a PCC minister on the cusp of retirement state that he felt he had wasted his ministry because it was only just before his retirement that he had finally met Jesus. He had finally been connected to Christ.

All those years leading worship of Christ, of being a body without head... and then finally getting your head on straight so to speak.

So all this to point out and have us understand that participating in worship and making connections to a congregation are very important parts of keeping the blessing going – and that we need both of them.

You need to connect to Christ AND you need to connect to His Body the Church or you will not experience the full blessing Christ wants to give you in becoming mature.

If we don’t understand this we will stall out the process of maturing in ourselves and in other believers.

So with this mind let’s explore how we can connect people to the congregation as part of the disciple making process because you can’t be connected to Christ - and grow in your relationship with Him... without being connected to and growing in a relationship with His Body, a congregation of other disciples.

You can’t say Jesus I really love you – but I’m just not into your Body – you have to come to love Jesus’ Body as well.

So let's continue to look at how to connect a person to Valleyview – but let's switch our analogy over to the agricultural world where it's called grafting, because it's a helpful example of how that is external and foreign becomes incorporated and organically connected.

Because that's what has to happen right?

Someone who is not a part of this congregation, someone who is from the outside community needs to come in (from our going out) and make friendships, experience care and fellowship and love and find a way to bond with others over a shared connection with Jesus Christ.

And it's always best when we understand that we are called to do this work, not just because it produces pragmatic results, but because it reflects something that has happened to us in our relationship with Jesus Christ – right?

We don't just GO OUT into the community because that's where we find non-Christians who we evangelize... we GO

OUT and leave our comfort zone and search for the lost - because it reflects what Christ did for us. The Word left heaven and became incarnate as a human, and came and lived among us, to seek and save the lost! (Luke 19:10)

That's why we GO OUT – it reflects what Christ did for us, we do what Christ did.

So to, we are to work to connect people to the congregation because of the way in which we ourselves have been connected to the Body of Christ.

That's what Paul is speaking about in Romans 11, which we read this morning, He says you *“have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root.”*

We need to realize that none of us are *“natural born Christians”* instead we are all branches of the wild olive tree that Paul refers to in vs.17, which does not produce much fruit or good fruit.

The implication is that we were all spiritually dead, we come into this world as branches growing off of a wild olive tree, or a vine – as Jesus speaks of in John 14 – but we are branches that bear no fruit.

We have no love for God, no willingness to be obedient to Him, to be faithful to His covenant, to Worship Him and thank Him as our Creator and our provider...

We turn good things into god things and worship them instead as idols and we are plagued with the seven deadly sins; pride, greed, lust, sloth, envy, and gluttony and we commit them in various shades of grey.

We are wild branches that produce bad fruit and should be broken off and thrown away...

But the amazing thing that has happened brothers and sisters is that we were grafted into Jesus Christ and His Body.

We were not part of God's chosen people to start with, but through Jesus we are included in the people of God and we are a part of the Covenant relationship that God has sworn to bind himself to us in which will eventually bring about the restoration of all creation and bring in the new heavens and the new earth.

Us wild olive branches now remain in Christ and we bear much fruit and it's our responsibility to make sure that other wild olive branches are also grafted into Christ by sharing the gospel with them, and then making sure they remain in Christ to bear fruit by grafting them into this congregation.

This amazing grace of being grafted in that was shown to us is why we work at doing it for others.

So... as the Apostle Paul says in Phil 2:1 *"if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete"* in the following three ways: *Be like-minded, having the same*

love, being one in spirit and of one mind. (vs.2) Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit (vs.3) And in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. (vs. 4)

And so brothers and sisters with encouragement, comfort, tenderness and compassion that comes from understanding what has occurred in our own grafting into Christ and His body let us explore some practical means by which we can flesh out these three ways Paul mentions.

Now it just so happens that when you graft in a branch there are also three things that need to happen.

First you have to provide physical contact; this requires that you make a cut in the stock, trim the implant, and physically connect them together... or as Paul says we value others above ourselves and look to their interests instead of our own. So we make a cut... we make room, we welcome others to be in and among us, conversing with them, being around them so

that we can have people physically make contact with us as a congregation.

Second the physical connection needs to be reinforced so that the cutting stays in place in the stock, so it gets bound up tight with waxed twine to hold it in place... and this is why we do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit brothers and sisters.

Relationships and friendships and fellowships which are strong enough to bind us together and keep new disciples in physical contact with a congregation won't happen if the main reason we want people to come here is to grow our congregation size or contribute to our budget or to provide more volunteers to do the work.

Jesus says *"Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."* (John 14:13) So our discipling relationships, friendships and fellowships are not about our goals... but about putting the interests of those who are being disciplined first, in order that their connection to this

congregation will stay in place and will result in them bearing fruit.

It's helpful to remember Jesus words here *"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: Love each other."* (vs.16,17)

So with physical connection in place, bound tightly together the third step in grafting is to wait for the life giving sap from the stock to be drawn up into the implant and from that sharing of the sap the implant receives life that results in growth of buds and leaves and eventually... good fruit.

So as Paul says in Phil 2:2 *"Be like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind."* This is a final and crucial part of connecting people to the congregation where we start talking about our spiritual life, experiencing our spiritual growth and our relationship with Jesus as a significant part of our relationships and friendships and fellowships.

It's like what Jesus describes in John 14:15 *"I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you."*

This is like when we bring into the open that actual, real, concrete spiritual connection which we have between us as forgiven sinners, who experience Christ's grace and mercy, who experience the Holy Spirit opening up scripture and teaching us and transforming us, and we talk about it and share it with each other and encourage one another in it.

That is what forms the substance for us to be like-minded, having the same love and being one in spirit and mind... we share the mind of Christ, we share the spirit of Christ – we are the Body of Christ... and we begin to live like Christ.

So do you better understand what needs to happen in order for someone to be grafted into a congregation? Maybe this has highlighted some things that you still need to connect in

so you can be fully grafted into the Body of Christ here at Valleyview?

And I certainly hope it's made you more aware of the importance of getting connected, staying connected and going deeper spiritually when we are together as a congregation.

So let's go over this one more time... the first part of grafting – that physical connection and contact, this happens when we go and shake someone's hand and introduce ourselves to them and strike up a conversation with them...

Whether they are here to participate in worship... or they've come to enjoy an event we're hosting, like a community fall fair, movie night, picking up or dropping off OCC Shoeboxes, or attending a music recital.

But... there are limited opportunities to for people to come here, there are far more opportunities for us to GO OUT together to make that physical connection.

It's as easy as 2 or 3 families deciding they are going to attend a Community Celebration together, like the Community Association events that occur at the park next door and I send email information around to you so you can decide to do something like this...

Or being part of a group of 3-4 people who would go out and show up at the baseball games that happen in the evening at the baseball diamond across the street and hand out water bottles or Gatorade and escort people over to our building who would like to use the washroom...

Or taking note of the houses in your neighborhood that have gone up for sale and then when the new family moves in – go over and welcome them, introduce yourself, find out about them and what they might need or are looking for...

These are some specific ways that we can make physical contact with people which puts their needs and interests ahead of our own – and lets them see we are not connecting with them for ulterior motives.

You never know how God might use these meetings to allow relationships, friendships, fellowships to form that can bind us together and can keep that physical contact going.

But even if He doesn't... even if you do these things with no results YOU are still simply being obedient to what Christ has called us to do and people are being blessed in the name of Jesus.

But – chances are that if you do these things regularly, if going out becomes a part of what we do regularly, then just because of the way God made the world to work there will be some results that occur and a connection will form.

And you can progress to things that start to solidify that connection, like inviting people out for lunch after church – go and eat together... invite them over to your house for dinner, schedule a play date between your children, invite their kids along with you go to the swimming pool or to a movie... go to a concert or a play together, offer to help them if they need a

babysitter or a ride or help them move... show them you care about them.

Don't just do this stuff with your family or with the people you've been friends with for years, deliberately and intentionally include the people who are just starting to connect to the congregation and this will help bind that connection tighter in order for it to allow that deeper spiritual life to flow through.

Now... you have to give that some time to develop and being in the right sort of context helps as well. It's similar to dating someone, you don't go from meeting them for the first time to asking them over to your house for dinner and then telling them all about your spiritual life.

You have to give this time to develop – and that takes consistency and regularity, which means you have to be around these people on a regular basis over a period of time – it can't be sporadic or episodic, and that may mean that you need take the initiative to do follow up with a call or text...

And then... when you're physically connecting with these people and you're developing good relationships with them – then you can begin to introduce “spiritual” talk so that you can establish that spiritual bond with them and keep them moving along in their discipleship process.

It might lead to having them join a Christ Care Group or taking the Valleyview 101 course or getting involved in the Prayer ministry or just meeting up for breakfast and checking in to see how you are both doing in your walk with the Lord.

But whatever form it takes, you don't just limit your conversation to talking about the weather, or work, or whatever happens to be on the headlines in the news... you are going deeper and you are getting real with each other.

So brothers and sisters, what I hope you see in what I've outlined this morning and how a connection could potential progress...

The key to keeping the blessing going in the process of connecting people to the congregation is about learning to love each other as Christ loved us, which is exactly what Christ commands us to do.

Everything we do in connecting people to the congregation is about reflecting what Christ does to connect us to himself and to His body – and the result of loving each other this way, the blessing that comes from it will be that all of us *“will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.” (Eph 4:15)*

Brothers and sisters, this is one head transplant that isn't theoretical but can actually become a reality for those who are being grafted into the Body of Christ, here at Valleyview and we get to be a part of it.

Amen.