

Several years ago, I received a phone call from the owner of a funeral home asking if I were available to conduct a funeral. I asked who had died and was given the name of a man I didn't know. He didn't have a church home, and no one in his extended family knew a minister. Funeral homes keep a list of local pastors for just such events and apparently it was my turn. So I agreed to meet with the family and learn all I could about the man, so I could conduct his funeral with some degree of warmth and familiarity.

I scheduled a meeting with the family at their home later that day, and asked them to have as many family members there as they could. When I arrived, the TV was blaring. They were watching a loud, obnoxious program. I began asking them questions about the deceased, it turns out he was their father and grandfather, but they seemed indifferent about his death. After a rather difficult conversation, I discovered he liked John Deere tractors, which is nice, but hardly something to build a funeral around. When I asked if any of them might be willing to share a memory or two at the funeral, they all declined, and several of them even mentioned they didn't plan on attending. I think *The Jerry Springer Show* was on at the same time as the funeral and they didn't want to miss it. The funeral was a disaster. His family seemed relieved by his death, and there no friends present, because the man didn't have any.

I remember reading a lot of Bible verses to fill the memorial service. If, when you die, Jennifer and I read a lot of Bible verses at your funeral, it means no one had anything nice to say about you.

A few weeks later, Onslow Winslow died and we had his memorial service in the 1892 meetinghouse. It lasted three hours, because people came from around the nation and across the ocean to honor Onslow's life and convey their love and respect for him. Driving home from Onslow's memorial service, I thought of those two men and the vast differences in their lives. One died and no one mourned. The other died and people came from far and wide to pay tribute. And what was the difference between them? The first man did not value relationships, and the second man did.

We've been talking about the importance of human happiness, our happiness and the happiness of others. Because of humanity's inability to agree upon what makes God happy, human happiness seems an appropriate goal of the religious life. We spoke of the need for a goal that engages the mind and body and spirit. Our last time together, we talked about the wonderful quote from Abraham Lincoln, that most folks are as happy as they make up their minds to be. This morning, I invite you to think with me about the connection between happiness and relationships. Happy people value healthy relationships. And because they value healthy relationships, they devote time, thought, and energy nurturing their relationships with others.

Because Christmas is so near, I thought of deviating from this series long enough to talk about the holiday, but then it occurred to me that Christmas is about relationship. More than any other holiday, Christmas is about God's desire for relationship and our human need for it. When John the gospel writer wrote that God became flesh and dwelt among us, that is a statement about relationship. The Greek word used for *dwelt* is *eskoneon*, which translates literally as "to pitch a tent among." God came and pitched her tent right alongside us. At one time we understood ourselves as separate and distant from God, then Jesus came and taught us a new reality—God is with us, God is beside us, God's tent is pitched alongside our tents.

Happy people do two things well—they realize the value and importance of relationships and friendships, and give careful thought to where they pitch their tents. While they are a friend to all, and hold no malice against anyone, they can discern which friendships deserve or require further cultivation and to those friendships they commit their time and attention.

Now let us turn our minds for a moment to this past Friday's massacre at the Connecticut elementary school. This represents a failure on many levels—our political failure to keep firearms away from troubled persons, our fiscal failure to identify and treat persons needing psychiatric care, and perhaps more directly, our moral failure to befriend the lonely, troubled young men found at the center of these unspeakable tragedies.

At the heart of each of these devastations, common to them all, are the quiet voices of those who knew these men best. And what do they say of them? What do we hear time and again? *He kept mostly to himself. He had no friends. He seemed unhappy.* These broken souls are the ghosts in our world. They move among us unseen, their desire to be known, acknowledged, and remembered so keen, so intense, they will do the unthinkable in order to be thought of.

What if a neighbor had taken this young man under his wing? What if a minister or a counselor or a former teacher who knew this young man had said, "Let's have breakfast today." What if his father had said, "I love you. I miss you. Can I come by to see you?" What if you or I had pitched our tents alongside this young man's life? Or a young man like him? What if someone had been able to breach the wall of this young man's isolation?

The November issue of *Rolling Stone* magazine had an extensive article on solitary confinement in US prisons. You need to familiarize with that article, because we Quakers invented solitary confinement. Invited by the US government to improve prisons, we suggested solitary confinement be used to give prisoners adequate time to reflect upon and discern God's will for their lives.

What we didn't realize at the time was that physical and emotional isolation from others doesn't heal us, it makes us insane. Without relationship, friendships, and community, we go crazy. So God became flesh and dwelt among us. *Eskoneon*.

Every day, God asks you to do that with someone else. God asks you to eskoneon, to come alongside the lonely, the broken-hearted, the frightened, and share your life. God did it, so we would know how to, and not just know *how to* be with one another, but know the importance of it.

Happy people value happy, healthy relationships. In those relationships, the sick are healed, the lonely are loved, and the broken heart is made whole. Sometimes it is others. Sometimes it is us.