

"Strings Attached"  
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United Church of Gainesville

Last week Larry told the story of the web from the perspectives of the spider weaving it and the woman walking through it. This week, I want to focus on the perspective of the fly caught in it. After I found out I'd be coming to UCG, Sandy contacted me and told me that the theme for my first sermon would be "Weaving the Web," and we were going to talk about community. My first thoughts were not of the web's beauty or rich symbolism. They were not of the connections to the internet, or social networking. Instead, I thought, "A web is a trap." So the working title of this sermon was "Community as Trap." As our gospel lesson this morning suggests, this is not necessarily a new idea.

A typical reading of the call of the disciples in Matthew applauds these men for their willingness to follow Jesus without knowing anything about him. They are admired for their faith or their perceptiveness, or in certain traditions, their blind obedience. But I think Jesus gives us a hint about why they really follow when he tells Simon and Andrew he will make them fish for people. Whether they realize it or not, as people themselves, they are the first catch. Their faith, or perceptiveness, or obedience is something like that of a grouper obediently lowered into a live well. It is no mistake that in Matthew's version of things when Jesus shows up, both sets of brothers are working with nets. They are about to be netted, hooked, trapped into community. At this point in the story they have no idea just how trapped they are or just what kind of community this is. This community will change their entire lives, change who they are. It will get inside of them, so that by the time Jesus is crucified, Peter's denials make no difference to his accusers. He is one of them. He has been thoroughly spun into the web.

Perhaps I have just confirmed all your suspicions about organized religion, the church, or UCG and you are inching toward the door. "Community as trap" is admittedly not the most beautiful image of what it means to share our lives with one another, which I guess is why they went with "Weaving the Web." But at the risk of driving you the rest of the way out of the sanctuary, I want to suggest that

community as web or net is not just a beautiful image or clever title but actually has something to teach us about what we are doing here at UCG.

I have long been interested in community and especially Christian intentional communities in which people decide to live their interpretation of the gospel, sharing their lives closely, sometimes putting their salaries in a common purse, doing common work, or just living in multi-family households. I have spent time in intentional communities in New York, Indiana, Illinois, and Oregon, and been inspired by the dedication of the individuals who have chosen such an extreme way of life: individuals who earned six-figure salaries but were willing to live near the poverty line and use that money to benefit their neighbors; individuals who dumpster dived all their meals, subsisting on the massive waste of our culture; individuals who found a way to live with twelve people from four families under one roof.

So, two years ago, inspired by these models of love and justice, I decided to start my own utopian community. My wife Rachelle, my two sisters, our two cats, and I all moved into a 3 bedroom apartment in Chicago. Extended family lovingly nicknamed it "The Amlin Commune." Our commune did not have a grand moral vision beyond recycling and keeping some compost worms, but it still felt like a great social experiment. In the weeks leading up to our decision, we had endless family meetings about how our life together would be structured. How would the chores be divided? How often would we share meals? Would we get cable? With the rhythms of our lives outlined on paper, we signed a lease, and for the first time since high school, my sisters and I lived in the same house.

I have always been close to Kate and Sarah, and I feel lucky to have such great sisters and to have maintained a good relationship with them. But as you can imagine, there is nothing quite like moving in together to make grown adults fight like children again. Now, that is not to say that our little experiment was a failure. Most of the time, the four of us got along very well. We shared cooking and dishwashing responsibilities; we paid less rent than we had when we were living separately; and we saw each other through a year of multiple transitions. Still, there were plenty of moments when I found myself in a shouting match which felt eerily like middle school. I wondered how three adults could find themselves back in those childish patterns so quickly, especially when our relationships were so calm while we lived separately. Was it really as simple as proximity?

It was and it wasn't. I think our conflict stemmed not from the closeness of our bodies, but from the closeness of our lives. Our lives, which we had gotten used to sharing with one another once or twice a week, were suddenly being woven together again. We became a part of one another's day to day existence, and suddenly we mattered to one another in a way we hadn't before. We depended on one another. We needed each other. Suddenly things like what we cooked, and how we cooked, and when we cleaned, and how loud our music was, and how long or how often we showered (or didn't shower) mattered. We were being woven back into one another's webs, and the strings we pulled affected others' lives.

In short, we began to expect things of one another. And expectations are the stuff of webs. They limit our choices. They suck up our time. They make us take one another into account. We are expected to show up at certain events, to act in a certain way, to follow certain rules. And even if we choose to defy the expectations of others, we are still shaped by them. Expectations are the stuff of webs, and we know instinctively to avoid them. As a society, we recognize that it takes a village to raise a child, but every kid learns to tell their bossy friends, "You're not my mom!" We know from an early age that allowing others to place expectations on us is dangerous.

And yet, expectations are the stuff of relationships. They divide friend from acquaintance and acquaintance from stranger. They are the reason that we don't mind if our mail carrier forgets our birthday, but we are hurt when our family does. They are the reason that the angry words of a friend sting much worse than those of a stranger, and they are the reason that there are people in our lives that we can call night and day and there are others for whom we wait until business hours. Love expects. That famous wedding reading from I Corinthians says love does not insist on its own way, but love still expects—even when those expectations are frustrated. I am reminded of a sermon by another pastor in which he encouraged the congregation to allow themselves to be angry with God. Anger with God and with one another still means relationship, because anger comes from expectation. Without expectation there can be neither love nor anger, only indifference.

But if love expects and expectation traps, how do we reconcile our fear of getting stuck with our desire for relationship? It's something I have struggled with in my own life. As I've shared with you I have a deep desire for community and have been wandering around the country, peering into the lives of those who

have committed to one another. I got goose bumps the first time I heard about a community in Oregon where members make a lifetime vow of stability to one another. They pledge to live beside one another and support each other for the rest of their lives. It's an amazing commitment.

Yet despite my fascination with such commitment, I have lived as a nomad. In the last ten years, I have had twelve addresses in four states. I've attended dozens of churches and three schools. I've made friends, but I have kept on moving. I have preferred to admire commitment from a distance, afraid to take root in any one place. I have avoided or evaded the expectations that others placed on my life, canceling plans, flaking out. While I enjoy spending time with other people in community, most Saturday nights find me at home watching Netflix. I have refused to be trapped, refused to be netted, refused to be fully spun into other's lives, and so I have avoided the community I so desperately desire.

In our current three-year plan here at UCG we have made Connections a priority. We are forming a plan to reinvigorate the sense of community in this place. As we have grown larger, it has been harder to maintain the sense of closeness that one has in a small or a medium sized church. Now, as a large church, we are looking for ways to grow smaller, for ways to know one another and care for one another more deeply, to connect with one another across the barriers of age, race, gender, sexuality, theology, or years of membership. We are weaving the web, wider and stronger, more intricately and more beautifully than before. And I invite you to get a little stuck.

I say a little stuck, because I want to make sure you understand that this is not an invitation to be devoured like a fly by UCG or by one another. Many of us have had the experience of that kind of community or that kind of relationship, which is why we are here. It is good to be able to move around, to think and feel freely, but it is also good to get a little stuck. You may not be looking to move in with your fellow UCGers. (Although, if you are, now is a good time to buy.) But making connections a priority means making each other a priority: moving things around to be with one another, following through on our commitments, finding space in busy lives for community. It means allowing the people around us to expect things of us, and it means expressing our expectations of them. It means meeting some of those expectations and frustrating others. It means conflict, the conflict which grows out of loving expectation, and it means the commitment to work out conflict in love.

Like the disciples, we don't know exactly what community to which we're committing. We don't know who will walk in through these doors or what they may ask of us. We don't even know all of those who are here now. We commit to one another by faith because we have been hooked by this place and these people. Like a couple getting married, or a new adoptive parent, we are committing to people who will grow and change, who will become other than they are now. We are committing to a community which does not now exist. This is the challenge, to let ourselves be woven in, to grow and change with one another, to fish together and wind up in the same net.

You and I have both been fishing for many months: you for a pastor and me for a church. And now we have caught one another. We are already full of hopes and expectations for each other, for what we will mean to one another. Some of these have been laid out, and many are still unspoken or even unimagined. We have netted each other: netted each other's strengths and each other's weaknesses, each other's joy and each other's sadness, each other's pasts and presents, and we are shaping one another's futures. We have caught complicated, conflicted, and holy people in our nets. And we have been caught by complicated, conflicted, and holy people. It remains only to decide where we will go from here. Will we allow ourselves to get a little stuck, a little attached, a little hooked? I, for one, am unpacked, and I am ready to be woven in.