

Sermon: “The Love of Weak Ties” (Laurel)

When I left San Francisco, I was saddest knowing I would never see the fig guy again. I’d lived in San Francisco for several years in my 20s and was moving back to the east coast for graduate school, which meant this whole life I had would become a far away place. And somehow, that fact got boiled down to the fig guy at the farmer’s market.

I had no idea what his name was, but he was there every weekend, cheerful and bearded and consistent. He sold figs and other seasonal fruit. He taught me about different types of persimmons - how the smaller smaller squat ones you eat when they’re hard, but the bigger acorn shaped ones can only be eaten once they’ve turned to mush - otherwise, you would learn, like I had, that they’ll coat you entire mouth in a bitter chalkiness for hours. I remember the belly laugh that overtook him when I confessed my error. The fig guy was one of those people that was part of the fabric of my life, who was kind and amused and present. And I didn’t even know his name. We weren’t friends, really, just people in the world offering some unrestricted kindness.

We often get hyper focused on the biggest relationships in our lives - especially during weeks like this one when romantic partnership is on so high a pedestal - but connection comes in many forms and the people we hardly know, what sociologists call weak ties, are an important part of the fabric of our lives.

We all felt this during the pandemic, when our lives were boiled down to quarantine pods and we only interacted with those closest to us. This fabric of connection was lost and it resulted in a pervasive feeling of loneliness. I think it's also why so many of you said that this congregation became even more important to you during those years, because the connection to a wider group was a balm to the loneliness and struggle.

And this need for connection isn't incidental, it's not superfluous. In the beginning of the book, Waldinger and Schulz write,

“We are often asked to summarize the findings of the Harvard Study...When we really think about the consistent signal that comes through after eighty-four years of study and hundreds of research papers, it is that one simple message: *Positive relationships are essential to human well-being*” (*Good Life* 29).

And as they described in the passage I read earlier, positive relationships are something of value even when they're casual encounters.

This from a BBC article on the power of weak ties:

“Gillian Sandstrom, a senior lecturer in psychology at the University of Essex, decided to investigate the extent to which people derive happiness from weak-tie relationships. She asked a group of respondents to keep a record of all their social interactions over the course of several different days. She found

that participants with larger networks of weak ties tended to be happier overall, and that on days when a participant had a greater number of casual interactions with weak ties – say, a local barista, a neighbour, a member of yoga class – they experienced more happiness and a greater sense of belonging.”

It’s a kind of love that’s often overlooked, that we can miss if we’re rushing, if we don’t know that our relational landscape has such a profound effect on every aspect of our lives.

As Waldinger and Schulz write,
“*Good relationships keep us happier, healthier, and help us live longer.* This is true across the lifespan, and across cultures and contexts, which means it is almost certainly true for you, and nearly every human being who has ever lived.” (Good Life 278)

People need people. Not one person, not the perfect romantic partner or best friend, though strong ties do have a significant impact on our lives - people need people, plural. We need the world outside our homes to help us feel whole and vibrant.

We need the fig guy at the farmer’s market and the barista who knows we’ll never order coffee. We need to be known.

And we, in equal measure, are needed by the world. We are also someone else’s kind stranger, someone else’s passing moment of humanity.

One of the most encouraging parts to The Good Life is the research that shows we can make different choices that foster a deeper sense of connection in our lives. We're not fated by strained familial relationships or the choices we've made in the past. We're never too messed up or too stuck to choose to prioritize relationships.

Now I suspect, given that you're all here, that some part of you knows you need connection to live a good life. But in a world that holds wealth and fame and "success," whatever that means, as the pinnacle of achievement - prioritizing human connection seems...squishy. Maybe even a waste of time.

But wealth and fame and success do not actually lead to a meaningful or satisfying life. They can actually lead to great loneliness and suffering. The science on this is clear.

People need people. We need to feel connected. It is perhaps one of the simplest and yet profound truths of what it is to be human.

So spread a little extra love where you can.

Amen and blessed be.