

We are connected — every one of us.

I knew that a year ago.

What I didn't know, what I didn't appreciate, was that — God asks us to be the connection.

That has been, is, my epiphany.

Epiphany Sunday 2019, I sat in the pews diligently listening to the stories of others. As I followed the events of their journeys, my thoughts meandered from 'that's nice,' to 'ahh, how quaint.' In short, I was internally — and politely — discounting the epiphany process and what it asks of us — of me.

As long as I can recall, I have comfortably considered myself an 'intellectual' Christian. I preferred to come to and understand my faith in the Triune God via reason and logic. I like the

Apostle Thomas. I want to see the wound. And, I am thankful that such an approach does not bring about a rebuke — at least, not from Jesus.

This approach may be a product my personality, I did seek out a life in academia.

It may in part be an effect of having grow-up in Northwest Arkansas, a cultural intersection of the American South and Great Plains. I was baptized into the Presbyterian Church as an infant. But in the Ozark Mountains, the Presbyterian Church represents a small slice of Christianity. Southern Baptists, Assembly of God, Church of Christ, and even more evangelical churches are predominant.

Growing up, I often had occasion to visit such as the guest of a friend or relative — especially during the summer revival season. These events were crowded, raucous, hot, and emotionally charged. Don't take this the wrong way, but if you haven't

figured it out yet, Presbyterians are a relatively calm — perhaps boring — lot. Each visit was a culture shock. Each visit reinforced a distain for the more emotional aspects — the more human aspects — of Christianity.

Last year's epiphany stories triggered discomfort. Subconscious at first, it manifest itself as polite disinterest. After all, the service would be over shortly.

Then Joel explained what was coming. Baskets would be passed around with paper stars in them. We were to blindly pull one out. Upon these stars would be a single word, a word we were to carry with us during the coming year.

I drew my star and cringed. Touch.

I like my space, physical and emotional. I don't like sharing my emotions with others. I like my barriers. They give me the freedom to focus on my wants and needs. They protect me from

being emotionally vulnerable or beholdng to others. Touch. The very idea was an inherent challenge to all that.

I grumpily repeated the word in my mind. In all honesty, I left TPC that Sunday slightly irritated.

Nonetheless, I went home and dutifully taped my little yellow star to the frame of a picture that sits on the chest of drawers my wife and I share. She's Catholic and thus doesn't attend TPC very often. I hoped she would not ask about the star and what it meant.

From its perch, the star was visible multiple times a day. I could not escape the word touch. I thought about it, thought about how I was suppose to be more open to being touched by others. God wanted me to receive something. How was I going to do it?

Days went by. Weeks went by. At this point, Nicole still hadn't asked me about the star. Despite my earlier desire not to be

asked, this now annoyed me. After all, if I was being challenged to open up and accept being touched by someone, surely the process would start with her.

I continued to think about my epiphany star. Yet, nothing was happening. No epiphany. Life went on.

Each semester I teach an introductory seminar for freshman in TU's Honors College. The course examines the role of the oceans in human civilization; from exploration, to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, to modern globalization.

In reality, is it's a welcome to the basics of college course — research design, academic discourse, causal logic, and campus life.

I bring in different groups from time to time to speak with the freshman. The Army ROTC comes by, as do representatives from

Cook Library, the Writing Center, and from minority student groups, including the LGBTQ+ community.

The course is also designed to hone the students' writing skills, they do a lot of in class writing.

After one assignment, one in which students were asked to discuss the role sea pirates played in the evolution of social norms, I came across something unexpected. Something that catapulted me along my epiphany journey.

One of my students, a bright, someone reserved young woman began her essay by stated she was gay — and, by putting this fact down on paper, and giving it to me, she had chosen me to be the first “adult” to whom she’d come out.

I sat in my office reading and re-reading her essay. Emotion began to well up in me. I was honored. I was taken aback. I kept asking ‘why me?’ ‘Why trust me with this?’

What had I done?

What had I said?

Slowly a theory of what may have happened coalesced.

In class, we had studied arguments about how sea pirates helped change Western society's normative status quo. We had studied the 1841 *Amistad* case — the one in which, despite the racism of the time, the US Supreme Court ruled that the inherent nature and rights of Africans were the same of Caucasians. And after a classroom visit from the LBGTQ+ Student Association, I made impromptu comments that students who happen to possess 'minority' traits in this society are valued, needed, and have every right to be — and to be cherished for — who they are. I closed that day with an inside reference to the film *Amistad* (which the students had watched), telling the them that I — a straight, white, Anglo-Saxon, veteran, and Son of the American

Revolution — had a modest proposal as to what should be done with our founding documents, if they came to be seen as promising anything other than affirmed equality and value . . . we should tear them up.

It was then that I had my epiphany — she felt touched.

It wasn't the lesson. It wasn't my words.

It was what they communicated.

You are seen.

You are heard.

You are not alone.

You are not forgotten.

We are connected.

No matter how different, we are connected.

Touch. It wasn't about me receiving. It was about me giving.

I was being asked to touch others, to be there for them. To connect with them on a personal level based on the compassion — the emotion — God asks us to have for one another.

This experience with my young student was the first of many over the last year. Moments with strangers, my family, former mentors, other students, and colleagues have continued my epiphany journey and lesson — that we are all connected, we are asked to hold one another, to touch one another, with our presence.

After a year with my epiphany star I have learnt that we are the connection, we are the congregation, we truly are the church.

Each one of us is asked, challenged, by Jesus and what he represents, to connect to those around us — **to those in whom we see ourselves, and to those in whom we cannot.**