

COINCIDENCE? OR SOMETHING MORE?

(02/03/13)

Scripture Lesson: James 5:13-19

“Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.” (James 5:16)

I’m sure you have all had experiences that struck you as strange or unusual but in a meaningful way. You think, “Wow!” “That was really strange!” We generally call these coincidences.

A coincidence, according to Webster, is the occurrence of events that happen at the same time by accident but seem to have some connection. We generally think of a coincidence as fortuitous, though it doesn’t have to be. Scientists have no explanation other than statistical probability for the coincidence of two or more meaningful events.

However, sometimes something happens that strikes us as more than coincidence. It strikes us as particularly meaningful, as meaningful on a deeper level. C. G. Jung, in attempting to explain this experience, draws from the Eastern concept of synchronicity, which he defines as an “a-causal connecting principle.” The events cannot be connected through the mechanism of cause and effect, yet they are not random. They are connected on a much deeper level, the level of meaning. This connection is so powerful that one event can actually cause or give rise to another. Our thoughts can actually affect matter.

When I think of coincidences I recall a time several years ago when, on a flight from Boston to Omaha, I initiated a conversation with the woman sitting next to me. I don’t usually do this. I am different from my wife, who initiates conversations and finds points of connection with everyone on the plane. I prefer to sit in silence and read my book.

For some reason I was chatty that day. The woman asked me where I was going and I told her. She told me she had just come from visiting her son and his family. I asked her where they live. She said they lived in Foxborough. I asked her what street they live on. She said Country Club Lane. I asked her if her son played a game with a funny-shaped leather ball every Sunday. She laughed and said he did. I told her that my wife and I live only a couple of houses away from Steve and Robbie Grogan.

What are the odds that Steve’s mother and I would not only be on the same plane

but also end up sitting next to each other? Not great. What are the odds that I, an introvert, would get in a conversation that would last long enough to find a point of connection between us? Not great. Yet there was no deeper meaning to the event. It struck us as a coincidence, but one of no great import.

Darlene and I had an experience like this when we were flying from Providence to Orlando. Once again, for some unexplained reason I got chatty with the person sitting next to me. It turned out that I had officiated at her wedding thirty years earlier. It was a nice reconnection, but once again it was of no great importance to either of us.

Sometimes, however, the event strikes me as more than mere coincidence. This often happens to me when I drive from my home to my office on the other side of town. There is a donut shop in downtown Foxborough. Every morning as I approach the center of town I say a little prayer to my guardian angel. I say, "If you really want me to have a donut, then open up a parking space for me in front of the donut shop." And you know what? This happens more often than not--usually around the fifth or the sixth time that I circle the block. Now that strikes me as a little more than coincidence!

Every Sunday we pray for those members or friends of our church family whose names appear on our prayer list. We do this because we believe that prayer makes a difference. We know it makes a difference to the person who prays; we feel different when we pray. We also believe it makes a difference to the person for whom we pray.

I think most of us have experienced those moments when our prayers, either for ourselves or someone else, seem to have made an appreciable difference, sometimes a dramatic difference. We suspect that our individual prayer or the prayers of the members of our prayer chain have helped us or someone else to recover from an illness against all odds, or to recover quicker than one would expect. But how does this happen?

I have my own way of understanding what happens in situations like this. It is not the only way and it may not even be the best way, but it makes sense to me. I believe we are all connected with one another on the very deepest of levels. I believe we all find our grounding in a vast energy and informational field, which I call "God." This God, whom Paul Tillich calls "the Ground of all Being," is a creative and healing force that creates us, underlies us, and flows through us, and guides the unfolding of our life. This God is impersonal in that this energy field underlies and finds expression in all that is, but this

God is also personal, is related to me as closely and personally as a loving mother or father is to a beloved child. When we pray, we enter into this field. I guess you could call this field the kingdom of God.

As I mentioned, this is only one way of understanding the power of prayer. The bottom line, however, is that these events cannot be fully explained. When we look at them through the eyes of faith, we encounter the mysterious presence, the guiding hand of God. As William Cowper wrote back in 1774,

*God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea, And rides upon the storm.*

*Deep in unfathomable mines Of never-failing skill
He treasures up His bright designs, And works His sovereign will.*

*Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take; The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break In blessings on your head.*

*Blind unbelief is sure to err, And scan His work in vain;
God is his own interpreter, And He will make it plain.*

When we open ourselves to this God in prayer and worship, we strengthen and deepen our connection, our relationship with this mysterious Spirit within us. When we do this, when we listen carefully for that still small voice, miraculous things can happen.

Sometimes we even get answers.

I would like to conclude our communion meditation by sharing the following true-life story. It was submitted to *Guideposts* by Kimberly Wood of Hornell, New York, and appeared in the December 2012 edition. Kimberly's experience encourages us to think about the power of intercessory prayer and about whether some of the things that happen in our life, some of the unexpected things, some of the mysterious things, some of the most meaningful things are just random events, just coincidence, or whether they are more than coincidence. Her experience leads us to look for the unseen hand of God that is working for good, for health and healing, behind the scenes in our lives.

“Lisa, Pray for Lisa.” It was the strangest thing, this urge that suddenly came over me. It was as if an actual voice had spoken, firm and commanding.

Pray for Lisa? I prayed for my six-year-old daughter every night, just like I did for her brother and sister. But why now?

We were on the road, headed to my parents' house for Christmas. Lisa was riding with my brother Bobby up ahead. I was following along in my car with my two other children. Bobby was holding the speed limit, just like I had asked him to. Lisa turned to wave at me through the back window. Everything seemed fine.

"Pray for Lisa. Now!" The voice again, even more emphatic.

A chill ran through me. "Lord, please watch over Lisa. Keep her out of harm's way. Wrap your protecting arms tight around her."

Up ahead, Bobby slowed. I could see a semi-truck directly in front of him. Its trailer was weaving back and forth. Something was clearly wrong with it. The trailer bounced and then fishtailed. Bobby's brake lights flared.

Then, to my horror, the trailer detached from the driver's cab. "Lord, keep Lisa safe!" I cried.

Bobby swerved. Just enough to escape a collision with the runaway trailer.

Thank God, Lisa was safe. Thank God for the voice, I thought.

But I could only watch helplessly as the trailer slid into the other lane—smashing into an oncoming car. Bobby and I both pulled over and rushed to the demolished vehicle. The backseat behind the driver was completely crushed.

"Is everyone okay?" I gasped.

"I think so," the driver said. He, his wife and their teenage daughter climbed out, shakily, but unharmed.

The man stared at the backseat and let out a deep breath. "We just stopped a couple of minutes ago and our daughter switched places with the Christmas gifts," he told us. "If she had still been sitting there . . ." He didn't have to say more.

The man then introduced himself and his wife.

"And what's your name?" I asked their daughter.

"Lisa," the little girl replied.

So why did the other family stop? Why did Lisa change places with the Christmas gifts? There was no reason to do this. No reason other than Kimberly's prayer--and the fact that Kimberly, a woman of faith, trusted in the guidance of that inner voice. I believe that God reached out to save this little girl's life, but the miracle would not have happened without Kimberly and Kimberly's belief in the power of prayer.

Let us enter into the deep places of ourselves, the place to which Jesus calls us, that we might experience our deep connection with him, with God, and with one another as we join together as a community of faith in the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
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