

## INTRO

In a couple of leadership meetings, I've heard the pastor say something like this: we aren't very big; we aren't very strong, but in obedience to what we understand about God and what we understand from God, and with an understanding of our inabilities, we are doing what we can with what we've got. We're using our corner and our resources to connect to our community and influence our community. We're saying "yes" and moving with what we have.

I really appreciate his perspective of encouragement, and that's what I want to bring to you today. Encouragement and a perspective about using your corner of influence and your ability to connect in order to lift up God and his love.

Most of us are in a position of influence — if you think about your life, you can run through in your mind the people you interact with daily. Some of them you can influence, some of them you do influence — influence is something everyone has. But you may not feel like you have enough. We feel frustrated, upset, and afraid when we think we don't have enough influence on the right people. There is probably someone who has broken your heart because you couldn't influence them.

Influence makes me think about connection. We are made to be in connection with each other. Connection is so much a part of us, that solitary confinement is considered cruel and unusual punishment in many countries. For me, who is an introvert, with a life that puts me in front of a lot of people, I kind of think that I might enjoy a little solitary confinement. But I know it wouldn't be for long. Loneliness is so corrosive and hard that most of us have arranged our lives to be in connection someone, if not with family, and we need that connection every day. (Even if we find it challenging.) (NB Minister for Loneliness in UK)

Connection and influence are words that define a lot of who we are and what we can do. I'd like to look at a passage in first Peter that helps us see these ideas in a way that I hope is applicable to us all.

## BODY

Let's talk a little more about connection. Looking just at the present generation, late teens, early twenties, there is a deep generational need for real connection. They have grown up with texting and talking online — with connection that is instant and constant — but not necessarily meaningful. For some of us, connections are like having a lot of loose marbles in a box, just rattling around, touching, but not connecting.

In a Harry Potter book I once read the phrase “joined up” writing. Joined up writing? It made me smile once I worked out what “joined up” writing must be — cursive writing — and the phrase stuck with me. Cursive writing isn't really taught very much any more, and kids struggle with it. I also think the younger generation struggles because of the way they grew up absorbing information and relationships - instantly, constantly, but not deeply or in a net of trust and toughness. They're connected, and they touch, but they're not joined up.

(By the way - that younger generation is a tender-hearted group of people. They do get mocked for being part of the snowflake “everyone-gets-a -prize generation.” But — as someone once said - they didn't do that to themselves. They didn't award themselves those prizes. They are, as a whole, NOT hard-hearted, and that is something to cherish.)

How do we build connection? We share our lives through being together, as we do here, and through smaller groups that we are all part of, and our work, and family, and — something that is unique to our generation — social media.

Set aside family, friends, work and small groups for a minute and just consider social media. Some of us are more hooked in than others, but most of us know someone who has or makes a lot of connections through social media. If you didn't grow up with social media, but you dutifully listen to the news, then you are still in touch with social media because a lot of the news reports on social media. So and so posted such and such. So and so is fighting with so and so. To some degree, the news is not about what actually happened; instead, it's a weird gossipy echo chamber of people talking about who is influencing the news.

Social media can be unintentionally negative. A lot of studies show that young kids who spend a lot of time on social media are more likely to be depressed because they are anxious about the negative interactions they may have with others, and envious of the good things they see. Not only do they interact with people they are not truly joined up with, they also interact with people whose lives are heavily “edited” to look good.

And it’s not hard to understand why that happens: no one posts a picture of the first bad pancake that everyone makes. It’s always pancake three, four and five, when the pan is hot enough and they look nice and gold and brown. I’m clicking around online, and now I want the perfect breakfast, that great vacation, that cute puppy.

Those social platforms - FB and YouTube and Twitter and Instagram — all have what are known as “influencers”. Influencers are those people who appear to live a trouble-free life of happiness and importance, affluence and authenticity.

Influencers are paid to showcase their lives, and in that showcase, authenticity is a kind of linchpin. I’m sharing what happened to me and what I did and how I felt, and you’re connecting to those things, and to what I tell you....versus I’m editing what happened to me and you’re seeing only what I want you to see, and also what I want you to buy.

Let’s sum up here: we need and want connection. We have influence in our lives, but we sometimes wonder how to use it, and we sometimes wish for more. Our society echoes our need for connection and it’s set up to respond to influencers as never before.

So what do connection and influence look like from God’s perspective? What does the Bible say about it?

The passage we are going to look at is in 1 Peter chapter 3, but I want to take a little run up to it, through the first part of the letter. The letter from Peter was sent to Christians in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia — modern day Turkey. It was a Roman province that was added to the empire after the time of Julius Caesar, so it was conquered within 70 ish years of the time Peter was writing. Authorities had been sent in to reorganize it. Antioch is a city in this

region, which is the place where Christianity was named as such and started to spread. There is a church of St. Peter there dating to about 1000 AD, so there is a long association with the apostle Peter and this region to which he is writing. Also the seven churches mentioned in the book of Revelation are located in this region.

Peter starts his letter by reminding them that they have reason for hope in suffering, and what salvation means. He tells them to be holy, because Jesus was holy, and to remember that they are not connected to the culture or this place anymore. He tells them to love deeply, and to want purity. He says they are a group of people who have become something else, a priesthood and a house. They are being built together into this “home” that reflects God’s glory.

Chapter 2: 5. 9-10 “you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house.... you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. **10** Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

Peter is telling Christians throughout that region what it means to be in connection to each other, and how they have been drawn from the outside to the inside. It is through mercy.

He goes on: you are foreigners and exiles. Abstain from sin. You live in a society that may accuse you unfairly and is hostile to your beliefs. You will probably suffer for doing good. No, you WILL suffer for doing good. You should allow the people around you to see your good deeds and glorify God.

He doesn’t say “keep your head down” and “just try to make it.” He doesn’t say “Hope for no trouble.” He doesn’t say “don’t make waves.” In Chapter 2:16 and 17 Peter says positive and active things: “live as free people” and “love the family of believers.”

Then he talks about how to live this out in practical terms... He starts to describe some specific difficult situations: about living under secular rulers, about living in slavery under a hard master, and about being the wife of a non-believer. It’s

important to understand this: our lives are different, but it isn't harder to be a Christian now than it was then. They had authoritative leaders, bad "work situations," and difficult marriages, just like we do.

After some specifics to those people, this is what he says to everyone:

**8** Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. **9** Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. **10** For,

"Whoever would love life  
and see good days  
must keep their tongue from evil  
and their lips from deceitful speech.

**11**

They must turn from evil and do good;  
they must seek peace and pursue it.

**12**

For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous  
and his ears are attentive to their prayer,  
but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil." [a]

**13** Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? **14** But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear their threats [b]; do not be frightened." [c]

Let's think about connection again.

Are you quarreling with someone? Are you living with a grudge, a fight? Are you not talking to someone in your family? Are you habitually sarcastic to someone or about someone because he or she is mean?

Stop it. You have to live differently than the world around you. "Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult." "Seek peace and pursue it."

In families, wives, husbands, or children, are you constantly striving for dominance and attention?

Stop it. You have to live differently than the world around you. “Be compassionate and humble.” And “Husbands, in the same way, be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heir with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.” Family life is a life of giving, not getting.

What this community of connection in Christ is - is a tough net of sympathy, compassion and humility. Not gossip, grudge and slams. It is a spiritual home built out of us, the living stones, who have received mercy. And by the way you can't build out of marbles because they are too smooth. It needs some roughness and squareness to build us together. Peter says “by his wounds you have been healed.” We have to live the way God calls us to live in community.

In our small groups today we are going to pray for family and for the church family, where this kind of living is a needed example for everyone.

What about influence?

There is almost no week where I don't hear someone in my network of friends, family and work share, casually, and kind of spontaneously, something that is really painful, that calls for compassion.

What a sweet privilege to be the one who is there, the one who hears and gives the mercy and kindness that God gives. You are an influencer who is not selling anything. By God's grace, you know that no one needs to be envious, anxious or lonely. And you can meet someone where they are at; your influence is your good deeds and your ability to share God's loving mercy, not your dominance or your intelligence or your \$300 jeans or your recipe for chocolate cake.

What if someone is belligerently or foolishly doing something you know to be bad for them? They are explaining and arguing how they did something and looking for your justification and agreement. That's kind of hard. We all encounter that at work, or with friends, or with parents, or children, or relatives or even, sometimes, with strangers.

Peter says this:

**15** But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, **16** keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

We sometimes fumble with exactly what to say about why we believe, but we can always be gentle and respectful. And we don't necessarily have to say "why you are wrong" but instead, "what is my hope." When our society around is a barrage of arguing talking heads, of rudeness and oversensitivity, of elbows-out aggression and "pity me" emotions, it's hard to keep your footing. But if you keep your eyes on your hope in Christ, on his love, his healing, his mercy and your salvation, then you have something worth talking about.

Finally, as influencers, Christians have a really unique line to authenticity. It's not a trouble-free life. In fact, it's the opposite. Suffering. Peter does say – "don't be the cause of your own suffering." And that's a fair point. But we will encounter suffering for reasons we cannot always understand. Some of it will be obviously unjust. You realize that you may suffer unjustly, but you are not intimidated or afraid of suffering. Why? You know God is bringing you through it and He will get glory. What if we lived with that sort of courage? What would the world say about people like that? We're not out there arguing, suing, blaming everyone else and obnoxiously fighting for our rights, but instead, living free and unafraid of trouble.

## CONCLUSION

The church is a place where disconnected outsiders become a loving community, where everyone is a sinner who now belongs. "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins." (1 Peter 4:8)

Patient courage in suffering is what shows who we are, in Christ. Mercy is the most authentic thing that we can give, because it is the thing we ourselves needed the most, and it is the thing that God most delights to give us.

Let's take time now, to get in small groups, to pray for ourselves and for the family, friends and church connections we have, for them to be stronger. Let's also pray that we have gentle and hopeful answers for the people we want and need to influence.