Spirituality
Scripture for Life



(Unsplash/Ryan Holloway)



by Sr. Carol J. Dempsey

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In our high-tech global environment, many of us have smartphones, iPads and tablets, plus desktop and laptop computers for personal and professional use. Some people spend time messaging, friending, tweeting and sharing. Many create and sustain virtual communities through Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and other internet resources that bring people together.

Fifth Sunday of Easter

April 29, 2018

Acts 9:26-31

Psalms 22

1 John 3:18-24

John 15:1-8

Recent statistics indicate, however, that as we become more connected to one another within and throughout cyberspace, we are, paradoxically, growing more distant from one another. Cyberspace relationships do not always allow us to detect tone in conversations, and online contacts often fall short on empathy. Social media stickers and emojis are no replacements for a handshake, a face-to-face smile and a needed hug.

This Sunday, we find ourselves still in the midst of the church's most joyous season, Easter. If the Resurrection were to happen today, all internet accounts would go offline, and cyberspace would experience a deafening silence. The magnitude and effect of the Resurrection experience would leave the technological world completely stunned.

This Sunday's readings are a stark reminder of what being "in relationship" means, and what is meant by being fully connected to the life-giving energy at the core of our lives.

The writer of Acts sheds light on the effects that a personal encounter with Christ had on Saul's life. Once a murderer, Saul now becomes Jesus' disciple, to the consternation of the other disciples who, knowing Saul's background, continue to

fear him until Barnabas relates Saul's conversion story to them.

Only then is Saul accepted among the disciples. Saul is now "in relationship" with Christ, with God, with Barnabas and with the disciples. These relationships have been forged through personal encounters and direct storytelling.

Furthermore, the church's missionary activity expands. The church grows as a result of the people's encounters with the disciples whose lives are filled with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit has the power to awaken the spirit in others and move them to form new relationships grounded in the love of the Lord.

In Psalm 22, the psalmist presents a magnificent portrait of all peoples, alive or deceased, in relationship with God who is just. To this God, the psalmist will fulfill his vows in the presence of all who love God. The psalmist desires that the stories of divine justice be proclaimed to the next generation of descendants down through the ages so that all people will come to know the goodness of God. The sacred relationship between God and humanity will continue through personal response, through memory and through storytelling.

In the second reading, John encourages listeners to love not only in word or speech but also in deed and truth. For John, love means being actively engaged in relationship with one another. This relationship involves the heart, the deepest place where one relates to God and to each other.

John teaches his listeners that their deeds of love are the surest signs that they, in fact, do belong to God, and that in spite of sin and the human condition, the human-divine relationship is not irreparably broken.

John also makes clear that God is greater than the human heart. God knows the human heart and responds to the heart's desires and needs. For John, love of neighbor brings people into union with God and with one another. This unifying love is a gift of the Spirit that abides in all and draws all together.

John's Gospel reading continues the theme of being "in relationship." The Gospel writer features Jesus using two metaphors to teach his disciples about the relationship that exists between Jesus and God, Jesus and the disciples, and the disciples and God.

With the first metaphor, Jesus likens himself to a vine. He then describes God as "his Father" who is the vine grower. In the second metaphor, Jesus describes the disciples as pruned branches that are attached to the vine. With the vine grower's care, both the vine and branches are destined to bear fruit. The branches, however, will only bear fruit if they remain attached to the vine.



(Mark Bartholomew)

All four readings speak about the experience of being "in relationship" with God, Jesus and one another. This relationship is established through interpersonal exchanges that are rooted in love and grounded in the Spirit. Being "in relationship" offers a profound sense of intimacy and fulfillment, an experience that web surfers are unconsciously hungry to find but that can never be truly felt among one's "virtual community."

[Carol J. Dempsey, a Dominican Sister from Caldwell, New Jersey, and professor of biblical studies at the University of Portland, Oregon, is currently working on the

book of Isaiah for Liturgical Press' Wisdom Commentary Series.]

Editor's note: This Sunday scripture commentary appears in full in NCR's sister publication Celebration, a worship and homiletic resource. Request a sample issue at CelebrationPublications.org. Sign up to receive email newsletters every time Spiritual Reflections is posted.

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