

By Pat Haggerty

I had the good fortune recently of spending some time in sunny Florida. There is nothing like sitting on the beach with the sun beating on you and feeling the warmth envelop you. I am not a true “sun-bather,” so this can only last for a while. I need to be doing something like walking the beach, reading or people gazing. I usually do all of the above.

As I was people gazing one day, a thought struck me. People were dotting the beach, children were playing and numerous individuals were collecting shells, which were strewn on the shoreline. Many of those people dotting the beach were looking at their cell phones. Why? What made them step out of the moment---step out of the beauty of nature to look at a technological device? It’s all about connecting. It’s that simple.

We all need to feel connected. We need to be a part of something bigger than ourselves. With our cell phones we can connect to friends, we can connect to our Twitter followers or our FaceBook friends. We can be a part of a larger community. We can belong!

I remember teaching Christian doctrine many years ago. With the first graders the emphasis was “I belong to the family of God.” We spent a lot of time helping the children understand the concept that Church was family and God was our Father. God loves us unconditionally and we belong to him. That theme permeated everything we talked about.

The same is really true now and for us as adults. We still belong to the family of God, but how do we translate that into our everyday lives? How do we manage to stay connected to God and to participate as active family members? Especially during this Lenten season, we need to ponder those questions. We need to find practical answers for our daily living. What is our plan for remaining connected to the Lord, for remaining a true child of God?

Let me offer a suggestion that made sense to me, at least. I did some reading while on the beach, and I found something that seemed very meaningful. I was reading a book, *The Saints in Mercy* (Our Sunday Visitor Publishing), which I had mentioned in a previous blog. The book is dedicated to various saints and how they each lived out a spirit of mercy in their daily lives. I was reading about Blessed Vladimir Ghika, a Romanian martyr. He wrote a book called *The Liturgy of our Neighbor.*
His book explains how our interactions with our neighbors are an extension of the liturgy we experience at Mass. He tells us that our contacts with our neighbor are nothing other than "enlarging the Mass in the day and in the entire world, like concentric waves that propagate from the beginning of the Eucharistic communion of the morning."

We should keep this in mind as we listen to the gospels during this holy season. Over and over we are told that what we do for our neighbor we do for the Lord. "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me." (Matthew 25: 35-36)

Yes. We belong to the family of God and we can stay connected to him through our neighbor.