Next 6 Sundays: experiencing the goodness of God in our personal connections. 4 Sundays on spiritual practices that help our connections, 2 Sundays on membership in Blue Ocean Faith. Remember we have a one-year renewable approach to membership—so each year we are all invited to either renew our membership for coming year or become a member for first time.

Harmful relationships hinder our brain capacity to experience goodness in good relationships. Double whammy: bad experiences of past makes better experience in present-future more difficult.

But the brain can heal through certain practices. Cognitive scientists call these exercises, but they are actually time-tested spiritual practices, rooted in the wisdom of Jesus.

Relevant to a church like Blue Ocean Faith because about a quarter of our members have experienced extreme stress in their prior church relationships owing to their sexual orientation, gender identity, Being part of a church can harm your mental health if the church practices discrimination-exclusion.

Any form of injustice causes stress that affects our connections. This past week, for example, senate passed a bill to send aid at long last to residents of Flint without safe drinking water for 3 years. House of Representatives is doing nothing to move that forward. Imagine effect on those living in Flint. Or when yet another unarmed black man is killed at a police stop, imagine stress on our families with young black men.

To say nothing of things that can affect anyone: a bad marriage, a hard upbringing, the job or boyfriend from hell that we keep too long....things that jangle the same nerves we need to foster good connections, to experience the goodness in good connections.

Research in Wired to Connect (Read book cover copy) Authors describe 4 distinct brain systems that can be harmed by bad relationships and healed by good ones...and by “brain exercises” that I’m calling spiritual practices.

Four systems correspond to acronym C.A.R.E : CALM, ACCEPTED, RESONANT and ENERGETIC. Good connections depend on our brain’s ability to calm itself when stressed, to experience acceptance, to resonate with others, and to be energized in our personal relationships.

The good news in the book is that when these systems degrade, our brains can heal through specific practices that help us experience the goodness in good connections. And wouldn’t you know, Jesus is a very helpful guide in this healing process.
CALM

We know that when we’re under stress our relationships suffer. We misread people, get irritable, expect worse/miss best in others. We highlight negative cues and miss positive cues. Marital satisfaction is high before children, takes a dip during childrearing years, and rises after kids leave. Stress effect.

2 things going on in our bodies. 1. our alarm system—the fight-flight stress response is overactive. 2. our calming mechanism is underactive. The calming system includes our 10th cranial nerve—longest nerve in body called “vagus.” Chronic stress can literally shrink the nerve, make it weaker and less active.

We need practices to dial down alarm system, and strengthen the vagus nerve.

INTERRUPT & REFOCUS

When you notice yourself feeling tense, overwhelmed, irritable, anxious, wound up, the simplest way to interrupt anxiety is to take a deep-relaxing breath.

The first divine human interaction in Scripture was experienced by the human as a deep breath: “The Lord God fashioned the human, humus from the soil, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and the human became a living soul/creature” (Gen. 2:7)

The word for spirit in the language of the OT and NT (Hebrew & Greek) also means breath: HS could be translated holy breath as easily as holy spirit.

Notice it says God breathed into the human’s nostrils. This line resonated with people because a deep relaxing breath is generally through the nostrils rather than the mouth. People knew by experience that a deep breath like that was life giving. So they pictured God starting us off with such a breath.

- Exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound.
- Close your mouth and inhale quietly through your nose to a mental count of four.
- Hold your breath for a count of seven.
- Exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound to a count of eight.
- This is one breath. Now inhale again and repeat the cycle three more times for a total of four breaths.

Practice that twice a day for a while so it becomes natural-comfortable. Then when you feel yourself tensing up use it.
COMBINE RELAXING BREATH WITH A MOMENT OF REFOCUS

Refocus plays a key role in teaching of Jesus and Paul on anxiety.

For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life...Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them...And why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow... (Mt. 6: 25-26, 28)

Only thing to notice here is how Jesus links freedom from worry/anxiety with a shift in focus. “Don’t worry” is followed up in each case with a version of “look outside at something oblivious to your worries” (birds/flowers)

At simplest level he’s saying, once you notice yourself being anxious, don’t double down on the thing you’re anxious about, but shift your focus to something outside of your narrow anxiety sphere, something other than the source of your worries.

This refocus strategy is echoed in Paul’s writing on anxiety. The words, “Don’t be anxious” are followed by “whatever is true, honorable, right, lovely, excellent, praiseworthy, let your mind dwell on these things.”

“dwell” is a good word because it’s what we do when we’re anxious—we dwell, rehearse, maintain an extended focus on whatever negative outcome we’re pondering. Our minds are like a toddler—just saying, “don’t grab your sister’s toy” doesn’t work... “here, play with this” is much better.

One of the brain exercises in the book under the calm section is to pick a memory of a time/episode/occasion when you felt connected to someone without anxiety. More vivid the memory the better. Sit with the memory, flesh it out, and then use it as a go-to memory to refocus when you notice yourself being anxious.

Running with Bill on way down from Half-Dome at Yosemite. Great trip, gorgeous beyond anything I’d seen, surrounded by beautiful valley, long hike to dome, on way back started running (downhill), second wind, felt like flying and like we could have run forever.

So, interrupt anxiety with a few deep breaths—blow out air thru mouth, then in through your nose to count of four, hold it in to count of seven, let it out through your mouth to a count of eight, repeat. Combine that with a shift of focus away from your fussing to your “all is well scene”
2 PRACTICES TO TONE YOUR VAGUS (calming 10th Cranial nerve):
smiling & listening. The physical acts of smiling and listening to others, tone your vagus.

Book of Proverbs says, “A cheerful heart brings a smile to your face” but the research indicates it works both ways: A cheerful heart brings a smile to your face and a smile on your face strengthens a cheerful heart.”

Describe Julia smiling while leading choir: people tend to smile back and everyone feels connected. Julia told me that in her everyday interactions she had to be intentional about smiling until it became more second nature. Because her more relaxed nature expression is a frown. When she was newly married to her now late husband Richard (professor of English at UM) at first he thought she was displeased with him when she wasn’t. She worked on smiling more often to counter that. And it worked.

It sounds ridiculously simple but smiling at people more often actually strengthens the part of your brain that calms you down.
And that helps your connections to other people. I’ve been having fun with this—making a point to smile at store clerks: a smile at first point of contact and when the sale is over.

LISTENING ALSO STRENGTHENS YOUR VAGUS

The vagus nerve tightens the small muscles in your ear that you use when you’re listening carefully. Pausing to listen carefully rather than distractedly to someone speaking, strengthens vagus

After every reading on Sunday, our reader says what? Those who have ears let them hear.
One of the most frequent sayings of Jesus. It was a refrain in his teaching—and it was all about listening paying close attention to his words, tuning in.

TWO-MINUTE REFLECTION

A minute or so to gather a memory of a specific time-event when you felt well connected with another person, focus on the memory and fill in details.

Then practice the 4-7-8