



“Connect”

Scripture – John 15:1-8

Sermon preached by Dr. Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, April 29, 2018

Debi Thomas remembers her father “taking her two year old daughter out for ice cream. After parking his car and lifting his granddaughter out of her toddler seat, he offered her his thumb and said, ‘You have to hold it tightly until we’re inside the ice cream shop. This is a busy street.’ His granddaughter took one look at his outstretched hand, wrapped her left fist around her own right thumb, and said ‘No, thank you. I can hold my own.’”¹

Sound familiar? ‘No, thank you, I can do it myself,’ is a compelling notion in Western culture. It is one of the central beliefs chipping away at Christianity, because the Christian faith is not about blazing one’s own path. It is about giving yourself to something larger than yourself. It is about the rich life that ensues from living as God yearns for us to live; which, as today’s passage makes clear, means maintaining a vital connection to the Spirit of Christ.

To set the context, today’s passage occurs during the Last Supper. Just hours before Jesus is betrayed and handed over to the authorities, he delivers his parting words. If the disciples fail to remember all of his parables; if the disciples forget what happened when they gathered in the home of Mary and Martha; if the disciples overlook some of Jesus’ beatitudes, it would be a significant loss. However, they absolutely must remember what he said the final time they were at table together. It is when Jesus gives his farewell speech that he underscores the core elements of his message.

Today’s brief segment of his extended final speech focuses on the necessity of remaining connected to him. Jesus says, “Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.”

We can only imagine how deep the bonds had grown among Jesus and his devoted disciples. Not only had they witnessed Jesus doing astonishing things, not only had they been riveted by his wisdom, not only had they escaped harrowing situations together, but Jesus had given them a reason to crawl out of bed in the morning and had filled them with a joy they had never known. He had unleashed a new power within them and painted a compelling future.

But with pressure mounting and the smell of death in the air, Jesus needed to reassure them that their connection with him could continue. Jesus leans hard on the word “abide.” In eight verses, the word appears eight times.

I do not know how precise the word “abide” was in 1st century Aramaic, the language of Jesus, but in 21st Century English, it has several different meanings. When the Apostle Paul wrote about love to the church in Corinth, and

said, “Faith, hope, love abide these three,” he used the word to mean *remain*. Faith, hope, and love *remain*. When someone says, “I cannot abide his Facebook postings,” she means, I cannot *tolerate* them.

In our passage from John, when Jesus says “Abide in me as I abide in you” he uses the word to mean *dwell* or *reside* or *connect*. *The Message* translation clarifies the intention of Jesus by completely avoiding the word *abide* altogether. Instead of saying, “Abide in me as I abide in you” *The Message* says, “Make your home in me just as I do in you.”

Jesus is calling them to make a deep connection with him, a connection that is not *external*, but *internal*. An external connection with him would mean hearing his teachings as knowledge or ideas or propositions. It would mean reading stories about Jesus as we would read stories of any historical figure. However, Jesus is driving at something deeper. He is talking about opening our soul to his Spirit. Instead of recording his words in our minds, he intends for us to feel them in our hearts and to sense them in our bones. It is like catching someone’s excitement or passion. It is like walking in someone else’s shoes. We see it in couples who finish each other’s sentences. It emanates from a deep connection of souls.

I suspect you can identify some specific personal characteristics that you gleaned from your parents. They did not tell you to acquire that distinctive feature; rather, their *influence* engrained it in you. In a similar way, the more we worship, the more we pray, the more we read scripture, the more we act in ways Jesus did, the closer we draw to him and the more his Spirit dwells within us.

As he often does, Jesus employs the language of metaphor to communicate his meaning. He says that God is the vine grower, he is the true vine, and we are the branches. If we remain connected to the vine, we will bear fruit.

But like the two year old who shunned her grandfather’s thumb for her own, we do not always want to be connected to Jesus. If Jesus is the vine and we are the branches, my life is not my own to do with whatever I please. Jesus makes demands on me. He calls on me to be kind to people I do not really want to treat with grace and respect. He wants me to stand for justice when I would just as soon keep my head down and not make waves. He demands that I give some of my treasure away to demonstrate that it does not have a stranglehold on me. He expects me to recognize the worth of people from other countries when I would just as soon bomb the hell out of them. He wants me to forgive people who – in my personal opinion – do not deserve to be forgiven.

If there are no times when the teachings of Jesus perturb us, then we are filtering out part of his message. If there are no times when the Christian message is inconvenient, then we are not taking it seriously. Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz Weber says, “Christianity is a lousy religion for the ‘I’ll do it myself’ people.”

Remaining connected to Jesus as branches are to a vine is not easy. It has never been effortless, but these days when the divisions among people are more acute than usual, it is especially challenging. So, what happens if we do not remain connected? Returning to our passage, Jesus says, “Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.” *The Message* translation says, “Anyone who separates from me is deadwood.”

It is not that God is uncaring and merciless, and ready to cut us off. God is perpetually urging us to remain connected. **We** are the ones who sever the bond when we act in ways that are not good for ourselves nor for our neighbor.

A colleague (John Boyle) shares a letter he came across. It was written shortly after World War II by a young man who sustained serious wounds in the war. Here it is:

“My name is John Crown. I am a paraplegic at Halloran General Hospital. My physical wounds are very small in comparison to my spiritual wounds. I have come back from death to a world that I no longer care for. I, who have been engaged in the great struggle to save the world from tyranny, and having seen my comrades die for the cause, can now find no peace in the world or in my country.

Having lived close to death for two years, the reasons why there is no peace seem infinitesimally flimsy. Russia wants the Dardanelles, Yugoslavia wants Trieste, labor wants more wages, capital wants more profit, Smith wants to pass the car in front of him, and Junior wants more spending money. To these I say, is it necessary to kill and cripple human beings for these petty gains?

Anyone who thinks a human body is so cheap that it can be traded for a tract of land, a piece of silver, or a few minutes of time should be forced to listen to the moans of the dying, night and day, for the rest of his life.

All the troubles of the world originate in the average person. The selfish and greedy ways of nations are just the ways of each individual multiplied a hundredfold. When the morals of each person drops, so do the morals of the nation and of the world.

As long as our individual morals remain at a low ebb, so will be the world. Until each of us stops hogging the road with his car, stops fighting over the seat on the bus, stops arguing over who is going to cut the grass, there will be no peace in the world. If we wish peace again, we must return to the great commandment, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”²

If we lose our firm connection to the true vine, we can be bent in any number of directions, and eventually we will snap off from the source that provides what we need to bear fruit. But, if you make up your mind to allow God’s Spirit to seep into your soul; if you do not erect internal barriers to resist change; if you go beyond simply reading scripture and allow it to guide your path, God’s Spirit can transform you into a more Christ-like person.

Remain connected to the true vine so that you can blossom and bring glory to God.

NOTES

1. Debi Thomas, “Abide,” *JourneyWithJesus.net*, posted April 22, 2018.
2. John H. Boyle, “Intimacy and the Hard Labor of Love,” May 10, 2009.

Prayers of the People ~ Sue Linderman

And now we open our hearts in prayer.

God of grace,

We thank you for this day, for the opportunity to gather in your name, to hear your word, and to respond with love and compassion to the deep needs of our world. Together we seek shelter and sustenance here as we face the days to come. We celebrate the spirit of hope that is the sure fruit of our faith in your everlasting love and care. We give thanks that in life you nourish us and your Holy Spirit encourages us to reach our full potential in the gifts we have been given, so that we may share with others the joy of our life in you.

God of love,

We pray that you guide us to be more than unripe olives and sour grapes. In this time of struggle and uncertainty, inspire us to look beyond bitter politics and hurtful divisions to find your love at the heart of our relationships, to know that we are bound together by far more than that which separates us. Challenge us, enable us, to grow to be a people of trust and respect.

God of mercy,

Help us to look beyond our own needs to recognize those who are hungry for food, love and justice. May we offer others a rest from the cold and darkness, the hatred and loneliness in the world. We profess that you have created us in your image, that each of us is your beloved child. Inspire us to move beyond mere words to the actions we take in committing ourselves to right wrongs and bring justice, without which there can be no peace.

As your son Jesus calls us yet again to be his disciples, breathe into us your Holy Spirit. We pray all this in the name of our risen Savior, who taught us to pray together saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power,
and the glory, forever. Amen.**