

"Well-Connected"

A Sermon preached by the Rev. R. Scott Herr  
First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – April 28, 2024

Please read:  
Acts 8:26-40  
John 15:1-8

In talking about his new book, *How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen*, David Brooks asserts that most of us don't know how to connect at a deep level. A research professor at the university of Texas found that when someone meets a stranger, they understand what's going on in that person's head 20% of the time. With friends and family, it goes up to 35%. Some people are really good connectors, and they understand what's going on 55% of the time. Some people are 0% of the time but think they are 100% of the time.

The point is, connecting with people, even with close family and friends, is not easy. In our gospel lesson today, I believe Jesus teaches that *the heart of the good news is not hinged on more religion, but relationship*. The gospel is about connecting with God and one another at a deeper level of love...

I just returned Thursday from *The Fellowship Community* in Nashville. Over 300 PCUSA pastors gathered to hear inspiring speakers, talk in break-out sessions, and enjoy some dynamic worship together. The keynote speaker was Andy Root, who will be with us in September, as well as Dwight Radcliffe, cultural theologian at Fuller. Laurie Wheeler, a former colleague, was the preacher for the closing worship. I was able to be with old and new friends and colleagues, and the week was a reminder that connecting with people is crucial, as our very identity is shaped and sustained by the relationships we maintain.

Jesus makes the bold assertion: "I am the vine, and you are the branches...Abide in me." This imagery focuses us on the communal and relational nature of the Christian faith, but also asserts that the primary relationship we need is a relationship with the living God, the crucified Risen Lord. We are promised by Jesus that our very source of life is found in him, and that as we stay well-connected to him, we will have abundant life. Abiding in Jesus, being connected as branches on a vine, is a helpful image of what it means to be in relationship as a disciple of Jesus.

Throughout John's writings the *quality* of this relationship is clear: "For God so loved the world..." In the gospel according to John we hear Jesus commanding his disciples, "Love one another as I have loved you..." And today we read, "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called the children of God." It's all about *love*!

You need to understand that God had been working on this vision of loving community for a long time. When Jesus said, "I am the vine; you are the branches," he was tapping

into a vision of Israel that the prophets had talked about centuries before. In Isaiah 5:7, we read, “The vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!” In other words, God intends for us to produce a rich harvest of good fruit, and God laments when the vineyard goes wild, producing nothing.

Jesus makes the bold assertion that what the people of God could not do, he has done. A new community of love and justice is formed in Christ. The early church understood this, but faced great trial and testing, and so the call is to abide in him. The journey of discipleship means anything but safety and security. The meaning of abiding is not simply staying in place, but rather enduring, standing fast, persevering through hardship. But it is in this "abiding" that the images of our text become paradoxical...

It is comforting to be told by Jesus that he is the true vine and that we are his well-attached branches. But then Jesus says God "removes every branch in me that bears no fruit." It's a disturbing thought, but one that is found elsewhere in the New Testament. If we don't "bear fruit," if there are no results from our relationship, *there will be judgment*. As William James once wrote in a *Variety of Religious Experiences*, “It is much easier to teach a hypocrite to *talk* like a Christian than it is to teach him to *act* like a Christian!” The person who says I *am* Christian but does not *act* like a Christian is self-deceived. The fact is you can't abide in Christ without spending time *with* Christ, working *for* Christ, learning *about* Christ, praying and submitting *to* Christ, serving *under* Christ, bearing the fruit *of* Christ... the chief fruit being *love*!

Indeed, the Holy Spirit intends to do a new thing in order to realize the vision of the Kingdom of God's love foretold by the prophets. It is a much broader vision than I'm sure we can glimpse here today.

In our Acts text, Luke describes the scene of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch. It's interesting to note that the Eunuch, as he was reading from Isaiah 53, identifies with the Suffering Servant. The text makes it clear that the Ethiopian is wealthy enough to ride in a chariot and have his own scroll of Isaiah, educated enough to read it, and prestigious enough to be an official in the court of Candace, the queen of Ethiopia. He is humble enough to know that he cannot understand Isaiah on his own. He is generous, as he invites Philip to join him in the chariot to teach him. Nevertheless, this man is still an *outsider* for the religious people of Israel...

We don't know if he was a Jew, a “God-fearer,” or simply a gentile interested in the God revealed to Israel...but we do know that as a eunuch, as a castrated male, according to Jewish Law, he was excluded from the “assembly of the LORD” (Deut. 23:1; Lev. 21:17-21). Perhaps he identified himself with the humiliation and injustice

suffered by the Suffering Servant described in Isaiah 53. But then he asks Philip, “About whom...does the prophet say this?” In other words, he wondered whether the text was about Isaiah and his context, or if this passage pertained to him as well?

Philip understood Christ to be the Suffering Servant of God, “the righteous one, my servant,” who “shall make many righteous!” (Is. 53:11). Philip saw in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy. And he saw in Christ the ushering in of the new age of messianic blessing, when eunuchs and other outsiders are welcomed to be full members of the community of God’s people... (Isaiah 56:4-5).

When the Ethiopian then asked, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” a traditional religious person of the day could have come up with any number of reasons according to the law, but Philip believed the atoning sacrifice of Christ was sufficient... Most Christian denominations today would have a problem with Philip’s baptismal practice. Way too fast! Not enough training and not enough checking to make sure the eunuch was doctrinally sound!

But Philip was filled with the love of Christ, and wanted nothing more than this Eunuch would come to know the love of Christ without delay! And so “another man who felt lost and humiliated was found and restored in the wideness of God’s grace in Jesus Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

Here, my friends, is the fruit of the gospel. One who is of a different race, a different nationality, a different sexuality... is welcomed into the Kingdom of God as a beloved child of God. Philip’s missionary work among the Samaritans had been received with joy, and now he is further pushing out the boundaries of the Kingdom of God to connect another people group who had been previously excluded (see Acts 9:5-8)...

Which brings us back to Jesus’ command to abide in him... Just how well connected are we to the heart of this gospel? And what needs to be cut away so that we are freer to receive again ourselves and share with others this *good news* of God’s love?

Here is the great paradox of Jesus’ command to abide in him. As we abide in him, the Lord of the vineyard will continue to prune us as well... The verb here (καθαίρει) for “prune” has the same root for the word “clean” Jesus uses to describe the disciples after he washed their feet. In other words, there is still work to be done to clean us up!

Surprisingly, the branches that don’t bear fruit get cut, but so do the branches that do! Every branch that bears fruit is also pruned to make it bear more fruit. We are

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas Long, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 2 ( e-book Loc 16057 of 19547).

constantly being pruned, cleaned up, transformed so that we become more and more like Jesus. That's how Jesus can say that "whatever you wish, it will be done for you." You have to remember the huge conditional clause that precedes it: "***If*** you abide in me, and my words abide in you..." Discipleship, then, is a lifetime of learning to want *whatever* God wants, learning to love *whoever* God loves...and letting go of all the rest. And I can tell you, it is a painful process letting go of fear, bias and prejudice.

The important thing here is to recognize God is the One doing the pruning, and we must trust that God loves us more than we even love ourselves. Abiding in Christ involves holding on to the promise that nothing can separate us from the love of God which is ours in Christ.

A friend gave us tickets to the NYC Ballet last night, part of a series of dances celebrating the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Ballet. The first part of the evening was "Dances at a Gathering," with ten dancers and one pianist, playing various Chopin mazurkas, waltzes, and etudes. Listening to some of the dancers reflect on the piece, we learned that it was all about loving community. They all had separate playful duet dance opportunities, but then all came together at the end. Thy symbolism was powerful. One of the principal dancers put his hand down in the center of the stage, symbolizing the centrality of love in community, then everyone bowed to one another in a beautiful show of mutual respect before the final celebration.

The dance was a reminder that life is more beautiful when we experience it together, and while we can't always be perfectly choreographed, we can show loving respect to one another and especially to those who may be different from us, even hostile toward us.

David Brooks reminds us that getting connected is harder than it looks. But whether we understand what's going on in someone's mind or not, being fruitful means staying connected to the central reality of God's love in Christ. Being fruitful means being willing to have anything that keeps us from receiving God's love and sharing it with others pruned from our lives. The bountiful harvest is connecting with people so they can connect with the God who welcomes all in love.

So friends, consider what it means for you to abide in Christ and his love, and what needs to be cut away in you so that you move from traditional religion, toward life-giving, world-changing relationships as beloved children welcomed and well-connected in God's love.

*In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.*