

Connected

John 15:1-8

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By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

A newspaper reporter went to interview a successful entrepreneur. “How did you do it? How did you make all this money?” “I’m glad you asked,” said the entrepreneur. “Actually it’s a rather wonderful story. When my wife and I were married we started out with a roof over our heads and some food in the pantry and about five cents between us. I took that nickel down to the grocery store, bought an apple and shined it up. Then I sold it for ten cents.” “What did you do then?,” asked the reporter. “Well,” he said, “then I bought two more apples, shined them up and sold them for twenty cents.” Here the reporter was thinking he had a great human interest story, a Horatio Algiers success story. “Then what?,” he asked. “Then my father-in-law died and left us twenty million dollars,” said the businessman.

Now, that man prospered, not because of his ingenuity, but because he was connected. We all know the value of networking. Online we may be part of LinkedIn or some other network. We ask connected people to write letters of recommendation for us to accompany our college or job applications. We choose colleges based upon the connections that will form for us so we can enter professions with connections already established. We know the value of connections! Joining a country club or the city council takes connections.

So it’s no surprise that while Jesus is walking with his disciples through the Garden of Gethsemane, with vines and olive trees all around him, he turned to his people and said, “I am the true vine and my father is the vine grower . . . Abide in me as I abide in you. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” In other words, there is nothing that brings more joy to the Lord than a human being fully alive, living a fruit-filled life. That only happens when you remain connected. Life flows through all those connected parts, the roots, the branches, the leaves, tendrils, and the fruit. Life requires connections.

This past January I visited the Flora Springs Vineyard in Napa Valley with several seminary presidents. Ted and Julie are the owners. It is a family-owned business that Julie’s parents bought in the 1970s. Ted (her husband) became the horticulturist. He must be pretty

capable because he was recently named “Grower of the Year” in the valley. They took us out to the vineyard to show us how to cut back a vine. One prunes like one does roses and at a similar time of year when the plant is most dormant. 70% of the vine is pruned away and burned to prevent disease, the same procedure used in the first century and reflected in our text today. The gardener cuts near the buds. Cane pruning is one form that allows the healthiest two canes to remain and all others are removed. Usually there is trellis structure to support the canes in this case. Another form is spur pruning. It can take about 20 minutes per vine to prune. The point was clear. For new growth to occur in any living organism, pruning is sometimes needed and it can seem drastic. Sometimes the Lord prunes things out of our lives in order for new growth to occur but it can be painful.

For those who walked by vineyards every day, Jesus used a metaphor of vines and branches to instruct them about the spiritual life. In essence he says to live a fruitful life one must be connected. We all know that on some level. But Jesus goes farther. He says the truly fruitful life is the one that remains connected to him. And then he goes even farther to say, “Apart from me you can do nothing!” It is vitally important to stay connected to Christ in order to realize our potential and live the fruitful life.

Throughout the Scriptural witness, the life of the people of God is illustrated with agricultural images that may have been more familiar to them than to us. “Those whose hearts turn away from the Lord are like . . . shrubs in the desert . . . they live in the parched places in the wilderness. And conversely, those who trust in the Lord – whose trust IS the Lord, are like trees planted by the water . . . they do not fear when the heat comes or the year of the drought because they have roots beneath the surface that nourish them and so they continue to bear fruit in spite of what happens above ground.”¹

Other images that come to mind: Jesus said, “Beware of false prophets . . . you will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit . . . thus you will know them by their fruits”²

1 Jeremiah 17:6-8

2 Matthew 7:15-20

This all suggests that the help Jesus promised for all of life's stresses is never strictly private. It is personal. Jesus called Peter and Andrew, James and John, Mary Magdalene and Joanna, and others personally but he did not call them in for a private conference. He called them into a community, a network, in which he lived, and only in that community did they discover how they could draw on the power of God. And at the Last Supper, which they had just finished, when Jesus took the bread and broke it saying, "This is my body broken for you," he meant more than the bread in his hands. He was also referring to the people around the table. Community is the very essence of Christian faith rather than its by product. Faith remains personal but it can never be private. That is why church is so important. It connects us.

So what does it mean to be connected? Well, to begin with it means power, doesn't it? I hear people say, "I have connections," which is to say, "I have access to power or wealth. I can get it done!" One successful woman was invited to deliver a commencement address. She selected as her topic, "How to Succeed." As she entered the door leading into the auditorium, she noticed the word "Push" printed in bold letters on the outside. She thought that would be a good illustration for her speech. When she hit the high point of the speech, she said, "I can sum up my message in one word" and she pointed to the door. The students began to laugh. Puzzled, the speaker looked at the door. Printed on the inside was not the word "Push" but the word "Pull". And that is how many people succeed, not because of their "push" but because of their "pull." It's because they are connected to someone who is powerful. How often have you heard it said, "It's not WHAT you know, but WHO you know?" It turns out that has powerful spiritual implications.

But it is more than just access to power. Being connected also means to have a presence. To have a presence in our lives that we're not alone, that someone shares our life and is there for us. Life is tough when you're not connected to anyone. These are the people who become isolated and angry and turn on others with harmful intent. Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg testified before Congress about the recent disappointments and the hopes for Facebook. The issue was privacy and the sharing of personal information collected online, but the bigger issue was connections – that which makes us human and are essential for life to be fruitful. Recently a 25 year-old computer programmer took a van in Toronto, Canada and drove it into a crowd of people at lunchtime, killing ten and

injuring 14. His aim apparently was to murder women because he was socially inept and couldn't establish meaningful relationships with the opposite sex. He had posted on Facebook proclaiming "The Incel Rebellion has already begun." No one knew what that meant. Turns out it stands for "involuntary celibate." This was no terrorist from Islam. It was a young man isolated and alone. He was angry that online relationships are no substitute for real human love and connection.

There are plenty of people who do a lot of things without Christ. They run successful businesses, raise families, even work in the non-profit world and perhaps even in churches — it's just that if I tried to do that, I would often produce sour fruit or no fruit at all. In being connected to the vine, the vine does something in me and for me. It's not a matter of my trying to accomplish things but of allowing God to live in me and produce God's life through me, as Christ said God would do.

I sometimes think that the reason we are often so ineffective today is because we are caught up in efforts to improve our lives, or to improve social justice and the moral underpinnings of society but have lost the connection with the source of life. And if the main power goes out in the house, all the electrical gadgets in the kitchen become junk. To be connected is to have power and to have an eternal presence in my life. It's to know I'm cared for and cared about. And it leads to a productive life. It certainly takes hard work and careful pruning, as any gardener knows. It takes seeding, and feeding, and weeding, and pruning.

It has been said, "The best time to plant a tree was 30 years ago. The second best time is today!" Don't wait for some other time to regain the connection you once knew with the vine, or to start a connection that you've never known. Jesus Christ is the vine and we are merely branches but we can exhibit remarkable fruitfulness when connected to him.

Bill Bradley, a senator from New Jersey, played basketball for the New York Knicks some years ago. In his book *Life on the Run*, he talked about what he called "magic nights". These were the times when the plays were run, the picks set, and the shots made as if each player were an extension of the others. The five players acted and reacted as one. Each instinctively moved to exactly the right place on the floor and did exactly the right

thing for the team to win. It wasn't about any one individual. The team was one body in five parts. As one body, it played and triumphed.

“I am the vine,” says the Lord, “and you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, and glorify God! . . . I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” Thanks be to God.