

YOUR CHRIST CONNECTION
John 15:1-17
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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Knowing we are created in the image of God should encourage us to be connected to God, who, by the way, created us to be dependant on him. Some may not like the idea of being dependant on anyone but themselves, but only fools believe they're completely independent and owe their success to anyone but themselves. The fact of the matter is we are utterly dependant beings, dependant on God and also each other. Cut off and isolated we are nothing.

Jesus used the metaphor of a vine and its branches to illustrate this dependence. Living in an agrarian culture, his disciples quickly grasped the concept. But since most of us never lived down on the farm, maybe we need another more contemporary metaphor to make Jesus' point.

Instead of the vine, let our new metaphor for Christ be a utility company's great generator producing a large city's electricity. Then, instead of the branches, let's substitute an electrical appliance say a computer, to be the metaphor for you and me. Now listen to Jesus say, "I am the generator, you are the computer, if you're not plugged into me you are worthless."

It's true, isn't it? The computer is an amazing invention, designed to give you and me access to the world. But if the Baltimore Gas and Electric Company suddenly disappeared from the face of the earth, with nothing to take its place, your computer would be a worthless piece of junk.

Likewise, human beings are designed to be plugged into God. I won't go so far as to say if you pull the plug you become a worthless piece of junk, because God doesn't make junk, but I can say unplugged from God, no human being, no matter how strong and intelligent, gifted and talented, can ever reach his or her fullest potential.

This modern metaphor I proposed may be helpful but it's fundamentally deficient. Jesus' original metaphor of the vine and its branches is still the best because a vine and its branches are organic living things while an electric generator and a computer are only mechanical gadgets. To be sure, God isn't a huge generator and we aren't computers. God is alive, and so are we, because God breathes life into us.

Last Sunday we were reminded that the earth, along with everything and everyone in it was created to be in a harmonious balance. All living things, plants, animals, humans along with the soil, air and water are intimately inter-connected and dependant on each other, but more importantly, everything is created to be connected to and dependant on God. If God withdrew his presence, everything would become nothing in the blink of an eye.

Christ came to reconnect us to God so we can experience balance in body, mind and spirit. Next month we'll observe Trinity Sunday, a day to consider the unsolvable mystery of the Trinity, three persons in one God. Christians believe that within the Godhead reside the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, three separate but equal personalities living together in a loving, three way harmonious relationship. The Father loves the Son and the Spirit. The Son loves the Spirit and the Father. The Holy Spirit loves the Father and the Son. There is no jealousy or competition; instead they live for each other.

This is why Christ came into the world: to reconnect us to the mystery of God so we can enter into these mysterious friendships so we can enjoy God and each other forever.

That's why the Christ connection is essential for our health and salvation. Why else would Christ empty himself, become our servant, and ultimately die for our sins?

When the time of his crucifixion drew near, it's understandable Jesus would have second thoughts about suffering for our sakes and even ask to be relieved of his responsibilities. Why die for people who'd reject, betray and deny you even though you came to reconcile them to God?

You have to wonder what Jesus was thinking in the Upper Room while giving out final instructions to the disciple but also praying they'd carry them out, especially when each would face his own moment of truth. But whatever Jesus was thinking, or feeling, only his intimate connection with his Father encouraged him to carry on. Setting aside his doubts and fears, he spoke in earnest about what was ahead but he also implored them to keep themselves connected to him.

"I am the vine and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch bearing more fruit he prunes, to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed (or pruned) by the word I have spoken to you." (John 15:1-3)

"I am the vine...you are the branches." There's no better way to describe a disciple's relationship with his/her master. The Christian is organically connected to Christ. Not separate entities, we are intimately related - part of the living organism the Apostle Paul called the Body of Christ. So often in his teachings Jesus used parables from nature, especially farming, to illustrate the nature of God's Kingdom which he likened once to a mustard seed, the tiniest of seeds, but when planted grows into a great tree providing shelter for the birds.

But before this connection can take effect, the decision to be connected to God through Christ, must be carefully and intentionally made.

"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... If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you." (John 15:4-7)

We don't use the word "abide" in everyday conversation nowadays, so maybe a brief word study is in order. My trusty on-line dictionary tells me "abide" means "...to dwell or reside, to remain and continue, to endure, to wait for, to accept without question, to withstand without yielding, to submit." How could a short, two syllable word have so many diverse meanings? But each separate and unique definition, like the pieces of a puzzle, come together to form the bigger picture.

To abide means to submit and commit to the other by entering into an intimate friendship with the determination to endure any challenge, wait out any outcome, and live through any crisis, together and for each other. Sounds like a good description of the ideal marriage, a covenant promising to stick together as one through thick and thin, no matter what.

Isn't this Christ's commitment to us? He promised to abide with us in eternal friendship, even when we either can't or won't abide with him, which should tell us something. Only Christ's abiding makes our abiding possible! Only Jesus has the staying power to remain intimate and faithful through thick and thin. We call his commitment "grace," God's mercy and kindness in the face of our disobedience and meanness. Even when we keep our distance, Jesus stays close. In other words, Christ, not us, keeps the connection open. Why? One word: love. Jesus loves you even when you don't love yourself, others or God. This is the Gospel of grace.

However (you knew this was coming) don't kid yourself into thinking that since Jesus loves you because the Bible tells you so you can do whatever you want with impunity.

This skewed rationalization is what Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace." Because Jesus died for your sins you can do what you like and like what you do without any fear of consequences. If you buy into this fool's gold, be prepared to remain spiritually adolescent, not child-like but childish, unless and until you come to your senses and accept Jesus' invitation to "dwell or reside, endure and wait" with Christ who already promised to do the same with you.

Here's some more good news: our abiding with Jesus also has consequences, this time positive: you bear fruit! Remember God's charge to Adam before the fall? "Be fruitful and multiply." Despite Adam's disobedience, God's charge to his descendants is still in force, we are called to bear fruit that feeds the soul, your own and your neighbor's.

You bear fruit whenever you keep yourself connected to Christ and allow yourself to become Christ-like or simply put, letting Christ love and serve others through your commitment, your sacrifice, your time and energy. You see, despite what you hear, Christianity isn't about self-improvement, reaching your goals and realizing the pursuit of happiness and becoming successful by tapping into the power of God and making it work for you. That's blatant heresy and sometimes I wish the televangelists who peddle this claptrap could be publicly tarred and feathered for leading people astray.

This is important: Jesus didn't die on the cross so you and I can be financially successful and socially prominent. He died so our humanity, broken and dysfunctional,

alienated and deformed could be restored and reconciled through our connection to Christ and Christ's connection to God.

Christianity isn't about self-improvement, which when you really think about it is an iffy proposition. Instead, Christianity is all about transformation, your transformation, God turning you upside down and inside out, purging you or pruning anything in you that needs to be cut off and thrown away so you can grow and bear fruit that will feed your soul and, just as important, feed the soul of the "little ones" Jesus sends your way if only because Jesus wants to connect with them through you.

As an amateur gardener I know something about the benefits of pruning. If you cut off a few branches here and there, a bush or tree can fill out and be shaped according to your design. Likewise, God can prune from you those unnecessary, even malignant, branches that sap and divert your energy away from God's intended purpose.

Jesus never said, "Follow me and you'll have the time of your life with benefits and perks beyond your wildest dreams." Instead Jesus said,

"This is my commandment...love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down your life for your friends. You are my friends if you do what I command." (John 15:12-14)

This command is plain and direct, needing no commentary, except to say the end result of abiding in Christ is finally giving your life away, not for personal gain, but for eternal life, not for you, but for the friend for whom you willingly lay down your life.

As we celebrate the Lord's supper this morning, we will be communing with Christ as we remember everything we know about him: Jesus the healer and helper, Jesus the friend and brother, Jesus who everyday kept his connection with his Father and the Holy Spirit open and alive, not for his sake, for ours!

Most of all we remember Jesus as our Lord and Savior, crucified, resurrected and reigning in heaven as the King of Kings, Lord of Lords and our connection to God.

Every day in every way we are blessed with all the graces of the Kingdom as God through Christ who reaches down to us, offering the hand of eternal friendship so we can know, serve and enjoy God now and forever. God, through Christ, makes what's for us impossible, possible, moving heaven and earth through his suffering and death to insure our salvation.

God's done all he can now it's up to us to keep that life-giving connection open and alive.