

## **It's All About Being Connected**

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John 15:1-8

Once in awhile all the readings on a given Sunday seem to come together with a clear central theme. Everything in this week's readings is about connections. We have the John passage about the vineyard, the Acts passage where the Ethiopian Eunuch is baptized and becomes part of the new church and the Letter from John that is filled with the image of abiding in God's love and the community of the brothers and sisters in Christ.

Community, connection was incredibly important to John and John's followers. When his gospel was written John's community faced being cut off from their family and synagogue after the council of Jamnia declared that anybody who believed that Jesus was the Messiah was no longer considered Jewish. The only had each other.

It is important to know that our gospel passage is during the last supper in the extended teaching that Jesus does following the meal. This passage occurs after Jesus has washed the disciples feet and declared them clean, but not all of them because he knew who was going to betray him. So Jesus is talking specifically to the disciples about being the branches that are connected to him and that they are fruitful. However one has already been pruned away.

So that is the immediate setting of the passage but the Greek that John uses is a type of verb tense that doesn't exist in English. This is verb tense that something has happened in the past, but has ongoing implications. This construction means that it is true for the disciples that Jesus is speaking to, but it is also true for all time in the future. In other words this teaching is for that specific time but also for our time. What Jesus is saying to the disciples in this passage on that night of the last supper, he is also saying to all of us and to the entire world. All are invited to abide in the love of Jesus. All are invited to be part of the vine and branches that are connected to the source of life. All are invited as John writes in his letter to abide in God's love.

Christianity is about connections and community, for we do not do this alone. Religion is not a solo operation. I know we hear people say, "well I can worship God on the golf course or in the woods." While that may be true, Jesus tells us that there is much more. He teaches that we must be connected to Christ and to each other. Sometimes we forget just how counter cultural this is. We tend to praise the individual, the person who does it on his or her own. Yet how many of us really do great things all by ourselves?

Why is community so important to our faith? First of all Jesus tells us that when two or more are gathered, Christ will be among us. When we baptize a new member we all promise to help in their growth as a Christian. What is important is not just our own individual relationship with God, but what we do as a result of our relationship to God and Jesus. The disciples never went out individually but always in groups or pairs. In community is strength and wisdom. The most important is that in community we stay connected to the vine.

I was very conscious of these connections as I went with a group of members down to Sacred Heart to feed the homeless in Norfolk yesterday morning. This is an incredible ministry that sees, touches and cares for what most of the time is an invisible population. I've been told that's the hardest part of being homeless. This feeling of being invisible of not being connected is demoralizing. We see these people, talk with them, feed them and even learn from them. One of the men looked at me as I handed him a pair of socks and I asked him how he was he said, "I'm blessed. Blessed every day." Then he gave me a big smile, put the socks in the bag with his sandwiches and went on his way. I'm blessed, blessed every day. Most of us could improve our outlook on life with that kind of attitude.

So too the vine grower in this passage keeps his vines well tended and therefore well connected to the source. In this metaphor God is the vine grower, the vineyard owner (a common Jewish theme), but the wrinkle is that Jesus is the vine and his disciples are the branches that are connected to the vine. Now as I said earlier the fact is that we too are included as branches connected to Jesus.

The Message translation says this so well. [John 15:4](#) "Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you. In the same way that a branch can't bear grapes by itself but only by being joined to the vine, you can't bear fruit unless you are joined with me."

We are woven together through our worship, our ministry, our friendships and our love of God and Christ. This is both an individual invitation as well as an invitation to our entire community. It is shortly after this passage where Jesus says, "They will know you are my disciples if you have love for one another."

Now I haven't touched much on the theme of pruning in this passage. There is the surface analogy of the pruned branch as a disciple like Judas who has lost their connection and that branch then is dead and is burned. Now this is not a reference to hell, but simply of the practice that the dead branches would be burned or used as fuel for a fire.

However let's expand that image just a little, or maybe I should say, let's focus it smaller. All of us have things in us and in our lives, which serve to pull us away from God. The world and sometimes life in general is great for doing that. We get busy, we get distracted, we have struggles and challenges in life. We may even

feel disconnected from God. St. Ignatius called these moments of desolation. These are the moments when we ask, "Where are you God?" However it is at those moments that God is actually closest to us. That is time to look inward and think about what may be creating that distance. This is when some pruning of ourselves may be what is required. Don't let the thought of the pruning be negative because when you prune a vine or a bush you make sure to leave what is good and strong, which means you need to recognize the good along with what is maybe not so good. So many people immediately focus on what is wrong instead of looking for what is right and helping that grow and flourish.

Pastor Steve Garner-Holmes wrote a prayer this week and I have printed in on the back side of the insert with the Nicene Creed. Please take that out and read it with me. I will give you some silence at the end of this to ponder the words for just a couple minutes. I pray that you will take this home with you and re-visit this prayer several times over the next week or so. Let the vinegrower do his work to make your faith your connection, stronger and deeper.

Loving God, Vinegrower of Life,  
I bring to mind with gratitude those ways you bear fruit in me,  
where your grace blossoms into blessing.  
Receive my thanks.

Wise vinedresser, show me what in me does not bear fruit,  
what impedes the flow of your grace in me:  
fears and resentments, desires, habits and attachments  
that do not bear the fruit of your love,  
dead branches that no longer serve you.  
Help me see.

God of mercy, prune me with your grace.  
Help me release all that does not bear fruit,  
and let go of what diminishes your love in me.  
Help me repent.

God of peace, help me trust your spirit flowing in me,  
blossoming forth with your glory,  
bearing the fruit of your presence.  
Help me love.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unfoldinglight.net/reflections/yzhe3xzbb48m6cna2ddpbcaaslbcff>