



Saint John United Methodist Church
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Message for March 14, 2021
"In His Steps: Always Connected"
Speaker: Pastor Tom Grieb
Scripture: John 15:1-8

Well-Connected

It was a year ago this Sunday that we cancelled our first worship service because of the Covid-19 Pandemic. I never would have dreamed that we would be a year and then some in battling this most challenging virus. At the time I thought we would have been back for Easter Sunday with a full house. It was not to be. We have all adjusted mightily for twelve months and, truth be told, will continue to do so for some time moving forward.

We have been kicking around the word, "emerge" a lot around here and have been asking the question, "What do we need to be doing as we continue to emerge from the Pandemic?"

A lot of that has to do with staying connected, connected to God and to one another.

When I first heard the phrase, "socially distant," I thought, "You've got to be kidding me? There's no way." We have come to know what that means and have put into practice.

Even though we have been socially distant, we have sought to stay connected. We have wanted to do that. We have worked hard at staying connected. Out of necessity we have become creative in the ways we communicate with one another. We have learned that distance doesn't have to equal disconnect.

We were not created to live in isolation, yet in the same breath we realize that far too many have lived in isolation over the past twelve months. You and I were not created to go it alone. We were created for relationship. Life was never intended to be lived in a vacuum. We are built to belong. We are designed by God to be in connection not only with him, but one another.

Let's read more about that as we turn to scripture. Today we from John 15:1-8. Let's hear this from God's word.

John 15:1-8

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples."

Always Connected

The need for connection is no more real than in our desire to be connected to God. It is his desire that we are always connected. We know in our heart of hearts that going it alone apart from God will only get us so far.

Christ struck a chord with his disciples when he gathered them around and began talking about being connected. Jesus knew his disciples would need to stay connected if they were to persevere.

As we have talked over the past few weeks Jesus spent a great deal of time preparing his disciples for what was to come. Jesus knew he was not long for this earth.

In the mix of that Jesus offered a vivid image of a vine and its branches and how important it is for the branch to be connected to the vine. Jesus knew how important it was that his disciples remain in him, even though he would soon be gone.

"I am the vine," he said. "You are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing." John 15:5

Christ's disciples would have readily understood the image of a vine and its branches. They knew that unless a branch was well-connected to the vine there was no possibility for fruitfulness. Jesus essentially was telling his disciples to stay close, and not just close, but intrinsically tied to him, to the place where they were depending upon him for their very lives. He wants the same for us.

I like the story told of the grandfather who was out walking with his young grandson.

"How far are we from home?" the granddad asked. *"I don't know,"* said the grandson.

"Do you know where you are?" *"Not really,"* said the little boy.

"Well, it sounds like you're lost," said the granddad. *"No way,"* said the little boy, *"I can't be lost if I'm with you."*

Such is the way it is for those who are well-connected to Christ.

The Principle of Position

Years ago, I came across a profound little book called *The Principle of Position* written by Miles J. Stanford. It is based on Christ's teaching about the vine and its branches, the very passage we read today. Since becoming acquainted with *The Principle of Position*, I tried to live out the importance of positioning myself in Christ as the very way he wants me to live out my life.

We are called to position ourselves in Christ. Just as a branch gains life from the vine, so we gain life from Christ. Apart from the vine, a branch withers and dies. Even the most elementary course in biology will tell you that life flows through the plant to its branches, bringing it to flower and fruitfulness. There is a life force that starts with the roots and continues throughout the entire plant.

As we find ourselves moving with due haste toward Spring, plants and trees are just about to burst forth with life, life that is possible only as plant's branches are well-connected. The very word Lent has as its root the word *"spring."* As we live out our sacrifices and offer our penance during this special season of the year, we begin to realize that spring also dawns spiritually.

The possibilities are limitless when we are *positioned* in Christ. He is able to do marvelous things both in us and through us when we are positioned in him. We will not only find ourselves more connected to him, but to others as well. The adage, “*deep and wide*,” runs true. If we invest ourselves deeply in Christ, our influence with others will be wide, and good fruit will be borne for God’s Kingdom.

A Million Miles Away

We can talk about connectedness all day long, but let’s face it, sometimes God seems like he is a million miles away. You might feel that way today. Things get so tough sometimes we wonder if God is even around. Sometimes things can get so dry that refreshment seems faraway. Sometimes we are so adrift that it seems as though God has turned a deaf ear.

I like the story told of the couple who were driving home from a lovely evening celebrating their 25th wedding anniversary. The wife was sitting snugly in the passenger seat with the husband directly behind the steering wheel. Suddenly the wife exclaimed with a bit of pain in her voice, “*Honey, remember when we used to sit really close together in the car?*” “*I do*,” said the husband.

He thought a little more about that and said, “*You know, come to think of it, I never moved. I’ve been right here all this time.*”

The stuff of things seeming like God is a million miles away has a whole lot more to do with us than it does with him. We are the ones who have moved. God is always present to share his love, to bless our lives, and to bring us peace. He is always with us.

God Stands to Re-Shape Our Lives

God is all about shaping our lives for the best. While he would prefer our cooperation with that, sometimes he simply just goes for it. In his wisdom, God often will seek to rid our lives of everything that is unnecessary and unfruitful so we can be more effective.

The image Jesus uses at this point is that of pruning. “*I am the true vine*,” he says, “*and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.*” John 15:1-2

At first glance, the word Jesus offers here seems pretty harsh. Christ sees God as a vine dresser who cuts off every branch that bears no fruit. God’s intent though is to make the vine more fruitful.

There is a word here for the church. God wants his church to be well-focused on those things that bear fruit for his Kingdom. He has little patience with any church involved in those things that draw it away from its core mission and ministry.

The same is true for every individual who seeks to follow him. God wants us to keep our focus on furthering his Kingdom. All of us are involved in things that are meaningless and of little worth, or that are not right or becoming. God has his pruning shears poised and ready for action.

As William Barclay puts it, “*God has little patience with profession without practice, words without deeds, and leaves with no fruit.*”

In God’s eyes, we are known by the fruit we bear.

Let God Prune Away

Pruning has always been a mystery to me.

It is beyond me how you can cut back a plant, sometimes severely, and it will rebound more vibrant and fruitful than ever. The results of pruning are nothing short of miraculous. I understand that pruning is essentially an effort at conserving energy. What does not bear fruit is removed so that a plant's energy can be more effectively directed.

The fact that we bear very little fruit has more to do with too much than it does with too little. All of us have things in our lives that need to be pruned. You and I have only so much energy and yet we find ourselves bent on adding more and more to an already full plate. We are much too scattered. Our schedules are way too full. Our hearts are way too divided. And we wonder why we lack focus and resolve. No wonder we stay exhausted. No wonder our "*branches*" are always bear.

This past year we have all had to re-assess what's really important. There has been more than a little pruning going on. Hopefully, that has left us with a renewed energy to bear more fruit for God's Kingdom.

Over the years a fellow by the name of Mike Breen has been a tremendous help in helping me to grasp the important work God's pruning in our lives. He uses a semi-circle and pendulum to make his point. As the pendulum of our spiritual lives swings, pruning leads to abiding, which leads to growth, which then leads to fruitfulness. So then, bearing fruit is not so much about what we do, but what God does.

Get this, we would do well to let God do his thing. We would do well to let God prune away. We would do well to let God clear out those things that prevent us from really being connected not only to him, but to other people. By so doing, we will find ourselves abiding in him, growing all the more, and bearing fruit for his Kingdom.

"Behold, I make all things new," says Jesus in Revelation 21:5.

Paul writes in Philippians 1:6, *"He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion."* You and I would do well to cooperate with God in that work by abiding in him.

Dr. Henry Cloud writes in his marvelous book, *Necessary Endings* that *"Pruning is a process of proactive endings."*

Cloud asserts that *"plants cannot reach their full potential without a very systematic process of pruning."*

The gardener *"intentionally and purposely cuts off branches and buds that fall into three categories:*

- *Healthy buds or branches that are not the best ones,*
- *Sick branches that are not going to get well,*
- *And dead branches that are taking up space needed for the healthy ones to thrive."*

Cloud contends that *"all of us have to give up in order to move forward."* Rest assured, God stands ready to make that happen.

Just Where to Cut and What to Prune

Whenever I prune a tree or a bush, I just go to it. Many times, my efforts leave the plant in worse shape than when I started, and Cheryl has been quick to let me know about that. When it comes to pruning God knows what he is doing. He knows where to cut and where not to.

- His every desire is to shape us into the things of beauty he created us to be.
- His every desire is to make sure we are well-connected to him.

His every desire is to make us fruitful in every way.