

First Trinity Lutheran  
May 6, 2012  
Text John 15:1-8

### **What does it Mean to be Connected**

Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches." On the surface, it seems a lovely story. A pastoral scene, a calming scene. It's nice to think of ourselves so closely connected to Jesus. It comforts us. But there's more to this story. Think about Jesus' words in the light of an experiment which was done at Amherst College:

Scientists at Amherst planted a squash seed. When it had produced a squash about the size of a person's head, they fit a band around the squash which was attached to instruments that would tell them how much pressure the squash exerted as it tried to grow against the constraint of the band. They expected that it would exert 500 pounds of pressure. Sure enough, in a month's time, the squash was doing just that. But the squash was not finished with growing. In two months it was producing 1500 pounds of pressure. At 2000 pounds, the bands were reinforced. The scientists gave up and stopped the experiment when the squash exerted 5000 pounds of pressure and broke the bands. But the squash hadn't given up. It was still trying to grow. It had sent out over 80,000 feet of roots, searching for the strength to grow against the force holding it back.

Now the story of the vine deepens, the plot thickens. This is not simply a pastoral scene. Not simply about the comfort of abiding in Jesus. It's that, yes. But it's more. It is a story about the love of God, and what God's love will do and dare. A story about the power of the resurrection. A story about a life-force so powerful that it cannot be stopped. A story to teach us that Easter is not over. A story to teach us that the love of God has come to Easter in God's people. So that Easter keeps happening and growing in human lives even today. So that the power of love cannot be stopped. Even in a world which thrives on hatred and violence, love does not give up.

As a rule, vegetation is not particularly really exciting stuff. When Jesus compares himself to a vine and then invites us to imagine ourselves as its branches, there is something in us that resists. It's bad enough being sheep like last week, helplessly wandering about in need of constant guidance; now we are reduced to vegetation. In a culture that prizes initiative, resourcefulness, and ambition, life on the vine is a tough sell. What do branches do all day, anyway? Plants are passive; plants have no voice; plants aren't able to do anything except plant themselves firmly in the dirt, wait for rain and sun to come their way, and grow.

Ah, growth! That's more like it. Growth is one aspect of this whole vegetation metaphor that we can get excited about. Growing sounds like doing something. We know we are meant to grow in our spiritual lives. An entire industry has sprung up dedicated to helping churches grow in size and influence. If we're not growing, we're dying, or so we've been told. Growing is the most important thing, right, not necessarily.

Here is Jesus, calling himself a vine, calling us the branches, and yet he never mentions the word "grow"—not even once. This plant is not called to grow, but to bear fruit. Jesus mentions fruitfulness six times in this short passage—that's six more times than he says anything about growth. The measure of a church attached to the true vine is not growth but the fruit of love (15:9-12).

And if you really love your plants and want them to be productive and healthy the Gardner has to prune. Pruning is essential if you want a healthily plant. Have you ever seen a vine that has not been pruned? It's usually a tangled mess – not unlike the tangled mess that "unpruned" people and communities turn into. So pruning has everything to do with love. And when we are loved as passionately as God loves us, we can expect to be pruned.

People who resist pruning usually end up living self-centered lives. They focus mainly on their wants, their needs, and their desires. Not only do they bear no fruit, they believe that others were placed on this earth to cater to them. It is not about how much we can get others to

do for us. It is about how well we love – our family, friends, enemies, strangers – that’s how others will catch a glimpse of the God.

However when it comes to pruning in this text the language is very strong -- cutting, pruning, being thrown into the fire, etc. Is this a threat if you don’t abide in Jesus? I like to believe that this is more of a metaphorical description of what actually happens when you are not connected to the source of life. You end up cut off, withered, useless, like the branches and scraps we clean up from our yard and haul away.

In essence this passage is all about abiding, remaining, with Jesus. That's where the horticultural analogy makes good sense. Branches don't last long apart from the larger tree or vine or plant to which they're attached. Jesus is urging his disciples to remain in him and with him. He knows he is about to go, to leave them behind, first in the event of the cross but even after the resurrection through his ascension. And he wants them to be prepared, to remain in fellowship with each other and to abide in his teaching and example.

How do you see your life in Christ? What does abiding in Christ look like to you? Do we feel connected to Jesus like branches to a vine? Do you feel connected to the church or to a congregation; do you we feel connected to anything at all?

These days we are more connected than ever, yet also increasingly isolated. We have more and more friends on Facebook, but fewer friends that we actually see and talk with in person. We are "linked in" all over the place, yet rates of reported loneliness and depression are skyrocketing. We are connected to more sources of news and information and entertainment and even to each other via email and social media; yet seem to be almost drowning in information while simultaneously starved for actual experience, particularly the experience of being in a real relationship.

I believe that's what Jesus offers his disciples here. Not simply connection -- that's not enough to nourish life -- but relationship, community, life in its abundance. But let's not kid

ourselves -- being in genuine relationship and real community isn't easy. Relationships have ups and downs, give and take. We have to be vulnerable in relationships, which mean that we can never completely protect ourselves from being hurt. Same with community. Communities are made up of real people, some nicer, some not, but all of us have our days and tend to act like jerks from time to time, and being in community means dealing that. I think one of the difficulties of living in our age is that we're offered a lot of things as substitutes for honest-to-goodness relationships, and while they may be pretty good at what they were designed for, they're finally not actual relationships. For example take email and social media, they can be very helpful at facilitating relationship, but they're not actual relationships, and sometime we end up thinking that "liking" someone on Facebook is the same as bearing with them through a difficult time. Or take money for example, we often think if we have enough money we'll be happy, feel connected and accepted. Or take all the stuff we buy with our money -- shoes or laptops or books or cars or whatever. All of it may be good things in and of themselves but they can't substitute for actually being in relationship with each other.

I think that what Jesus is saying here is that by being connected to him we are also able - even free -- to be connected with each other. Because finally what Jesus invites us to do is to be honest about who and what we are, even if that means admitting our penchant to flee the light and hide in the darkness. Jesus invites us to be honest, confessing our hopes and fears, our dreams and disappointments, our accomplishments and failures, our blessing and our sin, all the while knowing that we are accepted, loved, and forgiven. Amen

Pastor Tom Knoll