

Connection, Communion, Calling (John 15. 1-17)

A sermon preached on September 15, 2012 at the Service of Installation by Kenneth H. Carter, Jr., Bishop of the Florida Area of the United Methodist Church.

Connection

Jesus says, *"I am the vine, and you are the branches...and apart from me you can do nothing"* (John 15. 5) He is talking about growth, life, connection. The visible strength of the branches comes from a source, the vine. *"Apart from me"*, Jesus says, *"you can do nothing"*. At the core of Christianity is the assumption that we have a spiritual need. To be a Christian is to trust that God overcomes our weaknesses, forgives our failures, heals our brokenness.

We can live in connection with the God who wants to give us grace, help, forgiveness, salvation. There is a human temptation to keep God at a distance. And yet, to be a Christian is to admit that we need a Savior; it is to say, "I cannot do this on my own". Here is the good news: when we ask for help, we discover that God's grace is present in our weakness and this grace is sufficient. The Twelve Steps movement says it this way: *When we confess that we are powerless, we are connected with an incredible power. Apart from me, you can do nothing*, Jesus says. Live in me, he says, abide with me.

If we read ahead in the story, we are given a further explanation. Jesus says, *"I no longer call you servants, but I have called you friends"* (John 15. 5). To be a Christian is to be a friend of Jesus, to be at home in his presence, to live in him, and to know that he is alive. I'll say this as simply as I know how: you are invited into a friendship with Jesus Christ, to experience this connection.

If we live long enough, we discover the importance of friendships, because in friendships we become aware that we matter to some other person, and so we try to stay connected. How do friends stay connected? Again, simply, we stay in touch. Friends talk, listen, ask questions, come alongside. Friends are genuinely interested; they want to learn about what is going on in each other's lives.

What does a friendship with Jesus look like? There is time to talk and listen. This is prayer. A

friendship with Jesus is all about prayer. The late Henri Nouwen met a seeker who seemed to be uncomfortable. They happened to be seated next to each other at a charity function. Finally their conversation turned toward the real issue: *"I'm having trouble believing in God, in all of this"*, she said. He looked into the eyes of the woman, and with intensity he said to her, *"Give me five minutes a day, five minutes a day to be silent and in the presence of Jesus...five minutes"*.

We pay attention to our friends. We talk and listen. Could you give five minutes a day to spend in the presence of Jesus? Beyond talking and listening, we ask questions and learn about the lives of our friends. One evening recently I traveled with a couple of friends to an event that was out of town. Since we had time in the car together we were able to learn about each other, our hobbies, our children, our work. We laughed. We talked about serious issues, even our political differences! There were silences in the midst of the conversation. A friendship takes that kind of time.

How do we ask questions, how do we learn in the spiritual life? We turn to the scriptures. We open the Bible and we take a deep dive into it with our questions, and we begin to learn about this Jesus who is simple and yet also so mysterious!

Can a friendship lose its meaning? Yes. We can become disconnected. Sadly, I have friends whom I would not be able to find if I wanted to. We have lost touch. I regret that. And it's true in the spiritual life. And so a friendship with Jesus is a relationship that we are called to invest in, to give time to. It is a gift, but we access the gift through the simple acts of prayer and scripture. To do these simple acts is to stay connected---*"I am the vine, you are the branches"*, he teaches us.

Communion

The teaching of Jesus continues in the form of a command: *Love one another*, Jesus says, *as I have loved you* (15.12). He repeats these words in verse 17: *Love one another*. Love is absolutely at the heart of the gospel, the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus. This morning I want us to think about love as communion, as the experience of community, Jesus

reaching out to people through people. If God is love, then God's people make God's love visible. Again, in John's Gospel there is always something visible, tangible about God's love. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son (John 3)...Jesus, the word of God, became flesh and lived among us (John 1).

Years ago I remember the evangelist John Stott posing a provocative question. It is even more relevant in our postmodern culture. "How can the world believe in an invisible God?" The answer, he suggested, is found in I John 4. 11-12:

"No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is perfected in us.

We experience the love of God through God's people! This love is a gift, but we must accept it, and this acceptance involves giving up on the idea that I can live the Christian life on my own, without community, apart from communion with others. A few years ago Robert Putnam wrote about the values of our culture in his work *Bowling Alone*. The simple thesis of the book is that more people are bowling than ever before, but fewer people are involved in bowling leagues. We are bowling, but we are bowling alone. It is all about the individual.

On the way to communion we overcome the obstacle of individualism. We really do need each other. We cannot do it alone. For many this is the way to salvation, and this was true in my own life---I was impressed, drawn into, overtaken by a small community of Christians who included me and accepted me: a Sunday School class of four people, including the teacher; then a work team that helped to build a storefront church in Brooklyn; a Bible study group on a college campus; and the quiet witness of people in my own family. My way into the Christian faith came through other Christians. I experienced the communion with other people, and then I made the connection with God!

The communion with each other happens most often in smaller groups: Sunday school classes; Women's Circles; Bible Studies; Mission teams; Choirs. There is a strong tradition in this conference of covenant groups for clergy, and many laity are in Emmaus reunion groups. I cannot overemphasize the importance of being in a small group. We need a connection with

God, but we also need a communion with each other, and the scripture teaches me that we cannot have one without the other. Do you remember the insight of John Wesley?

“I shall endeavor to show that Christianity is essentially a social religion, and that to turn it into a solitary religion is indeed to destroy it.”

We are connected. And the life that flows from the vine into the branches is a life of love. We are grafted into each other, into the tree of life, to use another image from scripture, into the body of Christ, to use yet another. I cannot be a Christian without you, and you cannot be a Christian without me. For some reason God designed it all in just this way. And so a part of our conversion is into the communion, the body, the believers, the household of God.

Catherine of Sienna was a fourteenth century Italian spiritual guide, who wrote a series of dialogues or visions. In one of them she reflected on the body of Christ, poured out for her, and the responsibility we have in receiving that gift. In her vision God hires workers to labor in the vineyard of the church—we think of Matthew 20 here—each worker has a vineyard, a soul, in which some things are pruned and uprooted, and other things are nurtured. The vines within each person are all engrafted into the One Vine. But then she says,

“everyone is joined to your neighbor’s vineyards without any dividing lines. They are so enjoined together, in fact, that you cannot do good or evil for yourself without doing the same for your neighbors.”

The core conviction is our need for a friendship with Jesus. *“I am the vine, you are the branches”*, he teaches his disciples. We draw our strength, our life, from him: *“Apart from me”*, he says, *“you can do nothing”*.

Then the command and invitation that we should *“love one another”*. To make the point negatively, we cannot love Jesus, whom we have never seen, if we do not love our brother or sister, whom we have seen. Said positively, we experience the love of God through God’s people. Christianity is always incarnational---it takes on human flesh.

Calling

Now we conclude with a necessary implication. We are connected with God, and we are in communion with each other for a larger purpose: a calling in the world. *“You did not choose me”, Jesus says, “I chose you. I appointed you to go and bear fruit”.*

What does it mean to bear fruit? We can go back to those who heard this teaching for the first time, the disciples of Jesus. They would have heard these words and placed them in their Mediterranean context. The fruit of the vine produces figs, grapes, olives. These finally become food, oils, wine. But vineyards are primarily for the purpose of making wine. I am not an authority on wine. I have close friends who are winemakers, who have reminded me of the old question, *“How do you make a little money in the wine business? You start with a lot of money!”*

It is not accidental that the scriptures are filled with the imagery of vineyards and wine, with the cycles of planting and nurturing and harvesting, with celebrations where wine is freely poured and enjoyed. When those who listened to Jesus heard his references to vineyards and wine, they would have immediately made the connections: the labor, the cultivation, the pruning, the growth, the fruit, the abundance, the feast. In a vineyard one experiences life in all of its fullness.

And so Jesus makes the claim, of himself, that he is the vine. *“I have come that you may have life and have it in abundance,”* he had announced to them. To abide in Jesus is to remain connected to him. When we lose that connection, when the branch is severed from the vine, there is no life, no growth, no fruit. *“I want you to abide in me”,* he is saying. *“I want you to remain connected to me”.* Why does he say this?

The reasons go deeper than a personal relationship with Jesus. We remain connected to the vine because that is the way we bear fruit. And here the inward spiritual grace becomes an outward and visible sign. The natural consequence of a healthy root taking in nutrients is that it produces something wonderful. It bears fruit.

Jesus had been with the disciples for some time---he spent a significant amount of time with

just a few people, hidden mostly from the crowds, investing all of this time in twelve people. He was teaching them about friendship with God. He was instructing them in prayer. He was opening the scriptures to them. There were good days and bad days---*do you ever experience ministry, or life in this way?* Sometimes they got it, and sometimes they did not. He also sensed that there were unhealthy dynamics going on between them. There were struggles over who would sit in the places of power, over whose voice would be heard most clearly, struggles, by the way, that continue to be with the church. And so he gave them a command and an invitation: *love one another*.

But there is more and this where I quit preaching and go to meddling!

It was always about more than an individual's spiritual life, or a group of people and their love for each other. He wanted the disciples to bear fruit. He wanted their lives to make a difference. How do we measure all of that? How do we know if we are bearing fruit, if we are making a difference?

I love the insight of Oswald Chambers:

“Our spiritual life cannot be measured by success as the world measures it, but only by what God pours through us”

“What God pours through us”... I like that. When I hear Jesus say that *“I appointed you to go and bear fruit”*, a word occurs to me: accountability. What is important is that we allow the grace of God to flow through us into the lives of others. I love the words of the Great Thanksgiving:

“Pour our your Holy Spirit on us gathered here, and on these gifts of bread and wine. Make them be for us the body of Christ, that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood.”

We allow the inward and spiritual grace to become an outward and visible sign. The wine is to be shared, following the example of Jesus, who said, at the Passover feast, *“this is my body, given for you, this is my blood, poured out for you”* (I Corinthians 11; John 13).

Our calling as disciples of Jesus is to bear fruit. I want to thank you for being a part of this service today. It is one of the ways we begin to get to know each other as Annual Conference and Bishop. Pam and I consider it to be a gift of God's grace that our lives have been joined together.

I want you to know that a friendship with Jesus is very important to me. I am working on my spiritual life, I am not there yet, but I am working on it. I pray and read the scriptures every day. I need this. I hope that when my ministry comes to a conclusion with you, you will know that---the Bishop was a person who depended on God. I do.

I also want you to know that love is at the core of what it means to be in the followers of Jesus. Love is about relationships, it is about dignity, it is about integrity---sometimes love is about pruning--- and it is about forgiveness. And I hope that when my ministry comes to a conclusion in Florida you will know that I loved you---not my ideal of you, but that I loved the people and the churches of this conference as they, as you really are.

This is essential, that we love God and that we love each other—in the Wesleyan tradition this is the definition of holiness---but there is more. Beyond a connection with Jesus and a communion with each other there is calling, to bear fruit in the world. What would this fruit look like? People coming to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, new disciples, disciples of all ages, disciples from every nation, transforming their neighborhoods and communities and the world, welcoming children, and especially children of color coming into our churches, rebuilding the ruined cities, justice and righteousness flowing like a mighty stream.

I once heard the great preacher Zan Holmes say that no sermon should end without some good news, and without giving God the credit. The good news is that we are welcome at the feast, to connect with Jesus, to be a part of his communion, the disciples, and to respond to his call to follow him into a world that hungers and thirsts for the abundant life that he shares.

And if any or all of this is happening, let us give God the credit. How do we do this?

“My father is glorified in this”, Jesus says, “that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”

Amen.