

## **Staying Connected**

Psalm 22:15-31

Crossroads Christian Church

John 15:1-8

Easter 5B

May 3, 2015

One summer during our college years, Sandy was working as a counselor at a Campfire Girls camp in central Iowa, and I was working with my Dad in a factory on the eastern edge of the state. We wrote letters back and forth, with the several-day lag time for delivery. One day, I had a chance to call Sandy, and we talked for a long time, and were thoroughly delighted to hear one another's voice. Of course, afterwards, my Dad told me that for the cost of the phone call, he could have driven me to see my love! Staying connected with one another wasn't easy in those days.

Things are sure different now. It's amazing how much easier it is to be connected to other people today. Sometimes that can be a problem, like when someone sitting in the next restaurant booth is talking loudly on their cell phone to their best friend. Or when you have to sort out all the spam from your email account. Or when someone wants to sell you aluminum siding right when you've just sat down for supper. But it's marvelous, isn't it, when you can have a Skype conversation with a friend on the other side of the world; when you can hear the baby noises of a new grandchild in a different city; when you can check the internet to get vital information. Sometimes all our electronic connectedness can get in the way of human connectedness, such as when a whole table of teens are sitting texting others on their smart phones. I had a reminder of that a week ago in Indianapolis. We were walking through a trendy restaurant district, when we passed a place with a blackboard on the sidewalk. It didn't give the daily special. Instead, it said, "No Wi-Fi. Talk with one another. Pretend it's 1985."

Maybe one of the reasons that the internet and cell phones and instant messaging have all become so popular is that we are made for connectedness. In spite of the great American myth of rugged individualism, we're not completely human if we're not in relationship with others. We're each a part of a family, even if all our relatives have passed away, because our families have become a part of us; they have molded us; they have shaped us. We have a need to be connected because God made us that way. God made us to be in relationship, with God and with other people. We are connected. At least we are made to be connected, to God and to one another. But sin is a disconnect. It's what drives us apart. It's that which creates wedges between each of us and God; between each of us and one another. Sometimes a sin is an action or a deed, and sometimes it's something left undone. But sin itself is the attitude behind the action, or the feeling of separation after it. And what can overcome sin? Only

love and forgiveness. And that's where we meet the Christ—the one who healed, the one who forgave sins, the one who radiated the love of God the Father. This was the Christ who went to the cross for us, the Christ who conquered death for us, the Christ who drew the whole world to God.

Is it any wonder that Christ would talk to his followers about him being a vine, and them being branches? It was a familiar, physical, tangible image for them. Who didn't know about how a grapevine sent out its branches and nourished them so that the grapes might grow? Who didn't know that vines had to be pruned so that their energy might be redirected into the fruit? And didn't it also bring images from the prophets? Wasn't Israel itself called God's grapevine? The Hebrew scriptures abound with references to vineyards. Sandy's class remembers the story of Naboth's vineyard. Several times the vineyard is a metaphor for Israel. The prophet Isaiah turns it into a negative image in Isaiah 5:3-7.

"So now, you who live in Jerusalem, you people of Judah,  
judge between me and my vineyard: What more was there to do  
for my vineyard that I haven't done for it?  
When I expected it to grow good grapes, why did it grow rotten  
grapes?

Now let me tell you what I'm doing to my vineyard.  
I'm removing its hedge, so it will be destroyed.  
I'm breaking down its walls, so it will be trampled.  
I'll turn it into a ruin; it won't be pruned or hoed,  
and thorns and thistles will grow up.

I will command the clouds not to rain on it.

The vineyard of the Lord of heavenly forces is the house of Israel,  
and the people of Judah are the plantings in which God delighted.  
God expected justice, but there was bloodshed;  
righteousness, but there was a cry of distress!"

A fruitful vineyard was a sign of God's bounty." (unquote) So Jesus' hearers would be familiar with vineyards and vines and branches as signs of God's gracious gifts of abundance and connectedness, but also of vineyards being destroyed as a sign of judgment and punishment.

So Jesus, in the last days of his ministry, told his disciples that he was the vineyard; and how some branches would be pruned, others cut off, and others cast into the fire.

Mindi Welton-Mitchell helped me understand the passage better when she said, "It is not about pruning out people, but pruning out the sin within each of us so that we can bear more fruit. If we don't, we wither and fade and are useless, but all of us need pruning. All of us have places where we want to grow wild, where we don't care how our

actions may cause harm to others. We need to be pruned to bear fruit, to make the whole vine useful.”i (unquote)

Behind this wonderful image, though, was the reality, that we live, we really live, only in our connectedness to God and to Christ. God’s love is the power of our lives. When we separate ourselves from that love, we shrivel and wither. When we stay connected, God’s love flows through us and we bear fruit.

It all sounds good and beautiful, but what does it mean for us?

First of all, it means that since all our worth, all our value, comes from God’s love for us, we should pay more attention. We should reorder our own values to reflect that love. Isn’t it amazing, sometimes, when you meet somebody who seems just filled with love? It radiates from them. You feel warm in their presence. And you sense the presence of God in them. We don’t all have the kind of personality where love is so transparent, but love can still be that real in us. Prayer is one way to let that happen—praying to God to receive God’s love, praying to God for other people daily. Simple acts of service put love into action. Many times I’ve led Christian education workshops around the nation, and I’ve often asked people, what’s your first significant memory of Sunday school? Hardly any of them mentioned a fact they learned. Almost all of them mentioned a teacher who cared for them and gave them some loving attention and made them feel special. They help connect our children to what it means not just to believe in Jesus, but to be in relationship with him. We always need to find ways to make our church visible. To make a connection with our community. To show the world that we care. And we need to stay connected by supporting the mission of the church, through offerings, through work projects, or through our prayers.

One of the neat things about being a Disciple is that we have opportunities to develop connections with other churches and people like us. When we visit another Disciples church, we always feel at home, whether it’s a large church, small church, city church, country church. When we go to assemblies, we renew friendships and restock memories. That’s because we’re just a big family as Disciples, but it’s also because we’re a covenant community. We exist in covenant with one another, but more importantly, with Jesus Christ. Christ’s love flows into us, and we share it with others. We are the branches. Christ is the vine.

To stay connected you don’t have to subscribe to cable or dish TV, or have the latest cell phone on digital internet feeds or satellite hookups to your laptop computers. Christ is the vine and we are the branches, and what do branches do? They branch out. They make connections. They carry the life of the vine. They bear fruit and nourish the world with Christ’s love. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon

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<sup>i</sup> Rev-o-lution.org, resources for May 3, 2015,