

Fifth Sunday of Easter  
Stewardship Sunday  
29 April 2018

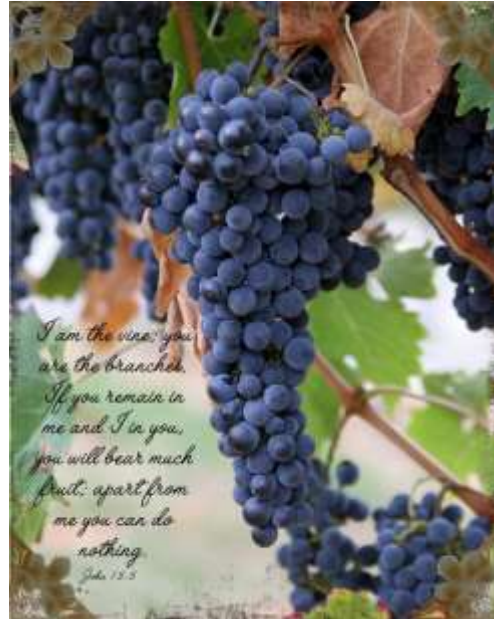
Dr. Susan F. DeWyngaert

Psalm 92:12-15  
John 15:1-8

The Importance of Being Connected

“Apart from me you can do nothing.” - John 15:5b

It is the simplest thing. Even a child can tell you. You put a piece of bread in the toaster, press the lever and nothing happens. No heat, no toast. Nothing happens because somebody unplugged the toaster!



Traveling this week on church business, I found myself in various airports trying to work. You know, that’s frustrating because getting internet is ... tricky. (Maybe some of you who travel every week can give me pointers.) Everyone has seen that hateful screen that coldly declares: “you are not connected.” Your computer might as well be quoting Jesus: “Without a connection you can do nothing.”

This morning’s reading is all about connection. Psalm 92 declares that those of us who do God’s will are like trees that thrive, because we are deeply rooted in the rich soil of God’s grace. Our gospel reading today is part of Jesus’ last recorded words to his disciples. The Last Supper was over. He had washed the disciples’ feet and told them they ought to humble themselves in love and service that same way. Judas, the one who betrayed him, had already gone out into the darkness to do that evil thing. As the evening came, in the last line of John, chapter 14, Jesus says to his friends:

*I do as the Father has commanded me ... Get up, let us be on our way.<sup>i</sup>*

They made their way from the Upper Room to the Garden of Gethsemane. It was about a mile walk through the city. They probably passed gardens where the vines were being trimmed. Nearly every family kept grape vines. It was the season for pruning; the cut branches were gathered into bundles, dried and used as fuel.

Earlier that night he had been telling them that he would not be physically with them very much longer. He knew the terrors and difficulties they were going to face in his name, and so he told them, he urged them to stay together; stay connected. Under no circumstances should they risk losing that connection – that connection with him and with each other.

Listen to Jesus from John, chapter 15.

*[Jesus said] “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. God removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit God prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.*

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let’s pray together:

God of love, nurture us with the deep, richness of your love. Feed us, we pray with the strength of Christ. He is the true source of abundant and everlasting life. Surprise us today with new insight through your word, so that in hearing we might believe, and in believing we might trust and follow, bearing fruit, giving ourselves fully to one another, and to you, in Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

Maxie Dunham, Methodist minister and the former editor of the Upper Room, has written dozens of books. In one of them he suggests that the three most important words in this passage are: Abide, Apart, and Ask.<sup>ii</sup>

Abide. It’s an old fashioned word that simply means to remain, continue or live. Eight times in eight verses Christ tells us to abide in him. Christ is the essence of all we are; he’s the source of our life. We must stay connected to him.

Paul put it this way, he said, “Christ in me is to live.”<sup>iii</sup> If you have any focus and power, it’s from him. If we are able to bear fruit it is because of him.

Christ is the air we breathe. A well-known Christian writer put it this way:

“Take a fish out of the water and put him on the deck. Watch his gills gasp and scales dry. Is he happy? No way! How can you make him happy? Do you cover him with a mountain of cash? Do you get him a beach chair and sunglasses? Do you bring him a ... magazine and a martini? ... Don’t be ridiculous! So, how do you make him happy? You put him back in the water. That’s what you do! You put him back in his element. He will never be happy in the boat because he was not made for the boat. He was made for the water.”<sup>iv</sup>

You and I were made for life in Jesus Christ, life in his community, so the Psalmist shouts, “I was glad when they said to me ‘Let us go into the house of the Lord.’”<sup>v</sup> We were created to abide in his power and presence.

Western culture teaches us something different -- that we are rugged individuals, self-made people, that we need no one. All day long we’re bombarded with messages telling us that we can

find happiness by clicking on something, tapping a screen, or going on an especially cool vacation or driving a new automobile. How sad that is, and how lonely!

It's very different in Jesus' family. Here we live for him, and we also live for each other. If you're feeling cut off or isolated from God or from the church, give me a call this week. There are so many great ways to help you reestablish that connection! I'd be honored to share them with you.

Abiding in Christ means we give ourselves fully to him, just as he gave himself fully to us. We imitate his life. We give as he gave. Bonhoeffer was right when he said that we have room in our lives for only one all-embracing devotion. For those who choose to be Jesus' disciples, that one devotion is Jesus Christ and his church.

The great psychiatrist, Dr. Karl Menninger once asked a wealthy patient, "What on earth are you going to do with all that money?" The patient replied, "Just worry about it, I suppose!" Dr. Menninger went on, "Well, do you get that much pleasure out of worrying about it?" "No," responded the patient, "but I get such terror when I think of giving some of it to somebody."<sup>vi</sup>

We all know that terror. What if we give something away, then need it later? One economist put it this way: "Money as a form of power is so intimately related to the possessor that one cannot consistently give money without giving self."<sup>vii</sup>

That is why I tithe, because when I give my money, I am giving myself. And because it's what the Bible tells me to do, what God asks me to do. Another reason is that giving at least 10% of my income to God (which is the Biblical definition of a tithe), giving is simply a joy, and one of the best ways I've found to draw nearer to God in trust, and in love for the people God loves. Giving to God is a spiritual practice, a tangible way of expressing my love. Quite frankly, it something that I couldn't live without.

There's a verse in the first letter of John that is a part of nearly every wedding service performed here in this sanctuary. It is 1 John 4:16:  
*God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.*

That is why we give – out of love, because we love; and in the hope that as we increase in generosity, God's love will abide in us, more and more. From the experience of my own life, and as I watch you grow in your giving, I know, that is exactly how it works: God's love abides in those who live in love.

The second word is Apart. Jesus said, "Apart from me you can do nothing." It's true! It's like unplugging the lamp and expecting light, or asking the toaster to toast disconnected from its source. The flashlight can't shine without its power source. We may tell ourselves otherwise. Every day, in various ways, I hear people say "I don't need God." Really? What they really mean is: "I have issues with God," or "There are some things I don't like about the church." Reasonable. Everyone struggles with both of those things; you know that, right? You are not unique in that.

This year marks the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my ordination. For three and a half decades – actually, it’s been longer than that, I’ve been trying, sometimes with very little success, trying, to put God first in everything, to make my commitment to serving Jesus Christ absolutely unconditional. And it is difficult and wondrous. And you have taught me so much.

Apart from him I can do nothing. And neither can you. Everything organic needs connection. Flowers are beautiful but cut off from their roots they will quickly die. Friendships dissolve without contact. Marriages can’t survive too much time apart. For the life of faith to thrive, we must be together – together in him.

Back during the days of the Cold War, in 1967, a woman named Svetlana Stalin, daughter of the Soviet dictator, Josef Stalin, shocked the world by immigrating to the United States. America used to allow people to do that. She explained her decision to come to the US this way, “I found it was impossible to exist without God in one’s heart.”<sup>viii</sup> She was right. It is impossible to exist as a full human being apart from God.

A man came to see me. This was years ago, but I remember. He had been visiting the church and was thinking of joining. He asked, “What does it cost to join this church?” I was surprised. I thought everyone knew that. “It costs nothing,” I said, “And everything.” He looked puzzled then he said, “What are the dues?”

I explain to him the Biblical concept of the tithe, that it goes all the way back to the time of Abraham and Sarah, when Abraham brought a tenth of everything as an offering of thanksgiving to Melchizedek, the priest of God Most High.<sup>ix</sup> That it is commanded by the prophets and practiced by believers from ancient times until today. Some of us tithe our salaries, others tithe our entire income, some others give far beyond the Biblical 10%, some are struggling financially, but still give; they try to increase the amount they give every year. God honors all of that, I said. But here’s the truth. God doesn’t want 10% of you; God wants all of you. The tithe is the first line of my budget because it reminds me that God is first, not just in my giving, but in everything. God wants to be your first priority, your singular devotion. And guess what? He joined the church! As far as I know he is still there.

Jesus said, “I am the vine and you are the branches. Apart from me, you can do nothing.” Everyone who abides in his love, abides in God; that is the only way to be truly alive. I discover, every day of my life, that I can’t do this on my own—in fact, I can’t even come close. I need so much help! I need the vine, the nutrients of his body, the energy and power of God’s people. I need God’s love to empower my own meager love.<sup>x</sup>

The final word is Ask. Jesus said, “Live in me, and let my word live in you. Then you can ask for whatever you will, and it will be done for you.” He means that if we maintain a vital connection in Christ, we will have his power – the power of servanthood, the power to transform lives.

There is really no limit to that power. We experience it here at Woods every day. Those of us who work and volunteer here get to see it. We witness the life-transforming difference that

Woods Church makes in our members and in those our church's ministries touch. We experience the power of God, and we can't keep it to ourselves! Like what happened here on Friday, our Director of Missions, Cynamon Butler, and Beth Hadley, Anita Guetchick, and the Presbyterian Women of Woods spent the whole day with some of the Samaritan Women. These are women who have been victims of human trafficking. Woods is a major funding source and partner in mission with this restorative Christian ministry. And I want to tell you, the Samaritan Women are not victims anymore!

That's just one example. There are a thousand more ways Woods Church is helping to transform lives through the power of Jesus Christ. He said, "Ask and it shall be given to you; seek and you shall find."<sup>xi</sup> So I'm asking. I'm asking God to turn the heart of this community to God! I am asking for Jesus Christ to be first in all things. Apart from him we can do nothing. Connected we are unstoppable!

So who's with me? I'm asking God to use this church in powerful ways. I'm asking you to be a key part of that. Together, connected with God and with one another we will declare God's power and God's love with the witness of our generosity, the strength of our love. I'm all in. Are you? Abide in Him.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>i</sup> John 14:31b

<sup>ii</sup> Maxie Dunnam, *Workbook for Abiding in Christ*, Upper Room, 2010, 108

<sup>iii</sup> Philippians 1:21a

<sup>iv</sup> Max Lucado, *When God Whispers Your Name*, Thomas Nelson, 2009, 167

<sup>v</sup> Psalm 122:1

<sup>vi</sup> Richard Foster, "The Grace of Giving" <https://renovare.org/articles/the-grace-of-giving>

<sup>vii</sup> *ibid*

<sup>viii</sup> Svetlana Alliluyeva by Scott Bauer, "Stalin's daughter and Wisconsinite Lana Peters dies at 85" *Wisconsin State Journal*, Nov 28, 2011

<sup>ix</sup> Genesis 14:18-20

<sup>x</sup> John M. Buchanan, from a sermon "Abiding" preached at Fourth Presbyterian Church Chicago, May 18, 2003.

<sup>xi</sup> Matthew 7:7