

"How Connected Are We?"
John 15:1-11

"I am the true vine and my Father is the vinegrower ... 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."

There's an idea that cuts across the grain of our culture. It worships rugged individualism, independent spirits, even isolationism and extreme egoism. That culture has infiltrated Christianity, maybe even more than Christianity has influenced our culture. Not only 88% of the unchurched population, but also 67% of the church population agree with this statement: "It is possible to be a good Christian or Jew without attending church or synagogue."ⁱ

Several years ago, Avery and Marsh satirized that attitude with a little song:

I can be a Christian by myself.
Leave my dusty Bible on the shelf,
I'll sing a hymn and pray a bit,
God can do the rest of it.
My heart's the church, my head's the steeple.
Shut the door and I'm the people.
I can be a Christian by myself.

"Not so," says Jesus. **"Apart from me you can do nothing."** Apart from him we are like dead wood. It's like the old country preacher who, while conducting a funeral one day, pointed to a casket and said, "I want you to know that this corpse was a member of this church for 30 years."

We Presbyterians like to talk about ourselves as being a "connectional church". That phrase is really redundant because the essence of being church is to be connected. To abide in the vine is to be connected to the branches. To be in relationship with Christ is to be connected with all who are in relationship with him.

To be Presbyterian refers to the unique way we work together in ministry and mission. Authority and power rests in ordered groups, never in individuals. Whenever I'm talking with people unfamiliar with Presbyterian ways, I like to point out that as a pastor, I may have a lot of influence, but very little "raw" power. You need to thank God every day for that. By the same token, individual elders have very little power. I thank God for that because otherwise I'd spend all my time greasing noisy wheels. Authority and power in the church rests in the Session, as pastor and elders meet together in an attitude of prayer and openness to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Deacons, when they meet together as a Board, may have absolutely no power, yet their ministries of care and compassion have the power to transform lives.

The Constitution of our denomination says "The Church universal consists of all persons in every nation, together with their children, who profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and commit themselves to live in a fellowship under his rule."ⁱⁱⁱ

That is, the church is much larger than any one congregation or any one denomination. It's not just enough for individual Christians to be part of a congregational fellowship. That fellowship needs to be connected to the other congregations in its denominational tradition. In turn, that denomination needs to be connected to other denominations. We can't bear fruit by ourselves, no matter how it is we define ourselves.

Nor can we steer clear of the demonic by ourselves. The major difference between a sect and a denomination is that a sect is disconnected. It is a faction that sees itself as the whole while a denomination sees itself as only part of the whole. A sect believes it has truth all locked up in its little system. A denomination knows that the truth is much larger than its doctrines and recognizes the insights into truth that other denominations bring.

Not only are our rugged individualism and independent ways a fruitless and dangerous kind of existence, they make us forget our basic human nature--that we were created in the image of God. Part of what that means is that God made us for life in community. We were created to live in a loving relationship with God and with one another.

Consider our beautiful stained glass windows. There are hundreds of pieces of glass. There are many different colors and sizes and shapes. If you touch them, you discover there are a lot of rough edges. Some of them are pretty sharp. The only thing that holds them together is the mortar. Jesus is the mortar--the vine. He holds us all together.ⁱⁱⁱ

If we tried to be connected to the mortar individually, without surrounding one another, we would be held in place, but there would be no design. Only as our lives are intertwined with one another is there a beautiful picture that reflects the glory of God.

Or, consider the redwood trees of the northern California coast. It is a well-known fact that they are the tallest trees on earth – upwards of 350 feet! They are also among the oldest – some have lived for 2000 years or more. What is not widely known are facts about the root system. It is relatively shallow with the roots growing outward more than downward. For every foot in height, the roots extend outwards three times as much. They always grow in clusters or groves and the roots are intertwined with the roots of other redwoods. That's why they can so tall and erect and live for so long.

The analogy with the church is obvious. The strength of Christian life is not found in going it alone, but in lives that are woven into the fabric of the lives of other Christians. And so the Psalmist sings: **"Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters live together in unity! .. For there the Lord has promised his blessing, life forevermore."**

Do you remember the ending of Robert Fulghum's little piece, "Everything I Need to Know I

Learned in Kindergarten,”? *And it is still true, no matter how old you are, when you go out into the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together.*

Learn from the redwood trees and learn from our stained glassed windows. But if, as it is often said, all analogies break down at some point, those surely do. Christian life is not just about extending our roots outward and hanging on to each other – we could network with each other around all sorts of devious and misguided causes. Ultimate strength is found only when our web or network of intertwined roots remain on the vine. **“I am the vine,”** Jesus said, **“you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”** In other words, any strength we feel in extending our roots outward to one another will be short lived unless together our lives are deeply rooted in Jesus. That’s the only way our individual lives, our life as a congregation, our life as a denomination and our life as the “one holy catholic and apostolic Church,”^{iv} will bear any fruit.

And so for our new officers and for each and every one of you, **“I kneel in prayer to the Father, from whom every family in heaven and earth takes its name, that out of the treasures of his glory he may grant you strength and power through his Spirit in your inner being, that through faith Christ may dwell in your hearts in love. With deep roots and firm foundations, may you be strong to grasp, with all God’s people, what is the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ, and to know it, though it is beyond knowledge. So may you attain to fullness of being, the fullness of God himself.”^v**

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- i. George Gallup, The People's Religion, p. 138.
 - ii. Book of Order, G-4.0101
 - iii. Psalm 133:1 and 3
 - iv. From The Nicene Creed
 - v. Ephesians 3:14-19, New English Bible