

Sermon – “Staying Connected”

Scripture Reading – Psalm 22:25-31, John 15:1-5

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Our first scripture reading is Psalm 22:25-31. This psalm is best known for its words in verse one, words which are spoken by Christ on the cross “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” The psalm, however, does not stay with the sense of God-abandonment. Rather the psalm combines prayer and praise, language of suffering and celebration, so as to say the one is not to be understood apart from the other. God connects with us in meaningful ways at the place where joy and sorrow meet. Today’s reading is a powerful voice of praise which moves within ever-widening circles. This is the Word of God.

25 From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear God. 26 The poor shall eat and be satisfied, those who seek God shall praise the Lord. May your hearts live forever! 27 All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; and all the families of the nations shall worship before God. 28 For dominion belongs to the Lord and God rules over the nations. 29 To God, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down, before God shall all bow who go down to the dust, and I shall live for God. 30 Posterity will serve God, future generations will be told about the Lord, 31 and proclaim God’s deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that God has done it.

Some of you have heard me refer to our new carpet in Parish Hall and the West Narthex as the John 15 carpet. Today’s second scripture reading in John 15:1-5 includes the metaphor of the vine and branches to describe the relationship between Christ and his followers. The lovely intricate vine branches remind us that we are intimately connected with one another and with the One who nourishes and enriches our spirits. This is Jesus’ final “I am” saying and part of his Farewell Discourse. Jesus’ parting words are meant to give his followers strength for the days following his death. For John’s community, faithfulness is determined by one’s relationship with God through Jesus. Because John is using inside language and his message is for those who already claim membership in Jesus’ community, this text is not anti-Jewish, nor does it cast aspersions on those of other faiths. Hear now the Word of God.

1 I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. 2 God removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit God prunes to make it bear more fruit. 3 You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 4 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. 5 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.

The title of the sermon “Staying Connected”

Text: “Abide in me as I abide in you...” John 15:4a

Let us pray. Loving God, from whom we come, to whom we return, and in whom we live and move and have our being, thank you for Jesus’ words reminding us of the importance of staying connected to you. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

*O Captain! My Captain! our fearful trip is done;
The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won;
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting....*

*O Captain! My Captain! rise up and hear the bells;
Rise up—for you the flag is flung—for you the bugle trills;
For you bouquets and ribbon'd wreaths—for you the shores a-crowding;
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning:...*

*My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still;
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will;
The ship is anchor'd safe and sound, its voyage closed and done;
From fearful trip, the victor ship, comes in with object won;*

*Exult, O shores, and ring, O bells!
But I, with mournful tread,
Walk the deck my captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.*

Walt Whitman wrote this poem 150 years ago as a nation mourned the unspeakable loss of their captain, Abraham Lincoln, who landed the ship safely by ending the Civil War, but not without the sacrifice of his own life. Certainly Abraham Lincoln is a Christ figure to this nation...Ironically, he was shot on Good Friday and died the next day with his pastor from New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. Reverend Gurley at his side.

Surely the cry of “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” rang with the bells across this great land, and yet, through the strength and perseverance of the human spirit and by the grace of God, that lament turned into praise through the years and to this day God’s deliverance is proclaimed to a people yet unborn.

Westminster’s beloved pastor, Reverend Albert Hale, participated in the Springfield service celebrating the life of his friend, President Abraham Lincoln, with whom he shared a deep respect and affection in their shared conviction that slavery had to be ended.

Many believe that part of what shaped Lincoln’s conviction about slavery was a trip he took down the Mississippi in 1828 as “captain” of a small flatboat. The adventure marked Abe’s first visit to a major city, New Orleans, and exposed him to the nation’s largest slave marketplace. That trip down the Mississippi, and a second one in 1831, would form the two longest journeys of Lincoln’s life and his only visits to the Deep South.

A few years ago I had the opportunity to spend some quality time sitting along the Mississippi, where the eagles soar annually in a Spiritual Retreat at Pere Marquette. I was in an “in-between place” in my life, wondering where God would call me next to serve. I found myself drawn to the banks during our quiet time and I sat in prayer, soaking up the sun in the quiet beauty of the lush vines and branches along this lazy river.

As I drove home on the river road that afternoon and listened to Bobby Darrin singing *Moon River*, I had a new appreciation for the rich history of the Mississippi and the privilege of being connected to this beautiful and powerful body of water. My mind drifted from personal memories of riding along the bike trail with Peter and Paul in both sunshine and torrential rain to

the wonderful stories of adventure on this river. From Lewis and Clark who began their westward journey on the Mississippi to the courageous souls who crossed over on the Underground Railroad. From Abraham Lincoln's life changing journey headed for New Orleans to the adventures of boyhood friendship written by Mark Twain; this river has sustained and nourished life throughout the years.

The *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is filled with the rich symbolism of the river. Written by Mark Twain in 1884, this novel is a story about an unexpected friendship forged on the Mississippi between Huck, a young boy who is escaping the restraints of a society forcing him either to conform to civilized life and a repressive religion or to live with an abusive, alcoholic father, and Jim, a black man who is escaping another restraint of society: the oppression and humiliation of slavery. The story begins in fictional St. Petersburg, Missouri, on the shore of the Mississippi River, sometime between 1835 (when the first steamboat sailed down the Mississippi) and 1845.

Huck and Jim are both seeking freedom and self-discovery on the river which symbolizes a spirit of regeneration and baptism. By removing themselves from society with its restraints and communing with nature, each discovers a new appreciation and understanding of God's creation.

They find refuge on a raft, which comes to symbolize a sacred and safe place where they are free to be themselves and connect with one another in ways they never could have imagined, in ways that would not have been possible on the shores within society and in ways that change their lives forever. They become connected in affection and mutual respect for one another in a life-giving and redemptive friendship.

There is something about the sacred and safe place on a raft floating down the Mississippi where friendship and self-discovery are found that resonates with Christ's call to *abide in me as I abide in you*.

The call to abide in Christ is an invitation to "stay connected" to the One who gives us life. It is much more than simply going to church, although church can be a meaningful part of staying connected. When our church disappoints us for whatever reason, we need to remember that God is larger than any religious institution. The community to which John wrote around 90 C.E. was suspect in the eyes of the established religious authority precisely because of their belief in Jesus. They were struggling to redefine community and recognized the importance of staying connected to Christ and to one another in that process.

If we are faithful to the text, it is about staying connected to one's inner world....that authentic part of who we are as children of God. It is about intentionally nurturing our faith....finding that safe, quiet place within where we are free to discover ourselves in relationship to Christ.

Like Huck and Joe, it may mean removing ourselves from society with its restraints from time to time and communing with nature. It may mean forging a friendship with someone whose life experience is different from ours, getting out of our predictable patterns that we may gain insight and compassion into another's circumstance. It may mean sitting in a quiet, safe place with a counselor, a spiritual companion or a confidant, reflecting together on the meaning of the events in our lives and the part we play in them. The importance of Christ's words to the disciples cannot be overstated. *Abide in me as I abide in you...stay connected.*

In the vine and branch metaphor, Jesus also speaks about the importance of pruning or "cutting back" to make our lives more productive. We live in a society with an overflow of information.

Let us not overlook the importance of stepping back regularly and consistently to nurture our relationship with Christ. Spiritual discipline is as important as exercising our minds and our bodies.

We also live in a society that promotes independence and making something of yourself. Though a valid goal, self-worth often becomes equated with our own success and the belief we succeeded alone. John reminds us that “none of us is an island” and our greatest resource is staying connected to the One who created us, the One who joined us in our humanity in Christ Jesus and the One who lives in our hearts through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

My friends, let us stay connected with one another and with the One who nourishes and enriches our spirits as we look for rainbows around the next bend with unexpected friendships that enrich our lives. Amen.