

Acts 8:26-40
Psalm 22:24-30
1 John 4:7-21
John 15:1-8

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Connections

I recall how chilly it was that early morning in June several years ago. It was a dark, overcast sky that threatened a downpour any moment. It was a perfect day for a funeral. I was a guest of the Bishop of the Diocese of Mt. Kilimanjaro in Tanzania and several of us were packed into a Land Rover as we set out to a remote village to attend a funeral. We traveled several miles toward the base of the mountain, zigzagging on bumpy, dirt roads that gave a whole new meaning to pot holes. When we went as far as we could by car we got out and walked up a narrow foot path through heavily foliated foothills. As we snaked our way up the steep mountain side, every 50 yards or so, a handful of people from tiny infants to those stopped over with age, would appear from a side trail and quietly merge into our human train, one by one. I was struck by their reverence and quiet dignity. They made a few nonverbal communications to assist others up the mountain side. The women wore vibrant, colorful dresses with matching elaborate headaddresses. The men had on clean white shirts, many with frayed cuffs, and some with ties and dress pants. Shoes were optional. Considering the steep and muddy narrow foot path, I considered tossing mine aside from time to time. It was quite obvious that each guest had taken great pains to wear their Sunday best to the funeral.

After hiking for about an hour we finally arrived at the home of the elderly woman who had died. The area surrounding her tiny cinder block house was full of activity as the guests gathered in small groups to visit. Several women were cooking in the outdoor kitchen, stirring huge pots beside barrels of home brew covered with large, green banana leaves to keep the many flies at bay. Inside the mourners slowly filed past the body lying in state in the main room of the home. All quietly gave their condolences to the various family members seated nearby.

In this part of Africa all from the surrounding villages are invited and expected to attend the funeral of a member of their community. This reflects their deep connection to each other. By their presence they honor God and each other as they stand together in their finery, rich and poor alike. As a community they embody the African proverb: *Because we are, I am.*¹

¹ Barbara J. Essex, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 2* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 477.

Our relationships define who we are. And, I think this is Jesus' message in today's reading from John's Gospel. He says, "Abide in me as I abide in you" (John 15:1). *Abiding* is about connecting. It is about being present. *Abiding* is enduring and remaining in relationship with each other and with God no matter how trying or messy it may get. A contemporary translation says it best. "Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you."²

Even though Easter Sunday has come and gone today we circle back to one of Jesus' last discourses that he gives to his disciples on the evening of Maundy Thursday. I know this seems confusing and makes one wonder what the folks who select our lectionary were thinking. However, with the experience of Jesus' death and resurrection so fresh on our minds we now know why Jesus is so intent for his inner circle of friends to understand the need to stay connected to each other and to not fall away after he is gone and when things get tough.³ He knows that only by being in relationship with each other and with God will they be able to keep the hope of Easter alive.

To make his point Jesus uses the images of vines and branches. Anyone who does any gardening knows the importance of pruning to keep a plant healthy and thriving. A branch that is left untended becomes wild, lanky and is susceptible to disease. It produces nothing and is good for nothing. However, a branch that is nurtured and pruned, receives the nutrients it needs from the vine to flourish and produce abundant fruit.

Over the last couple of months I have watched our parish volunteer gardeners spend hours on their knees planting and pruning the rose bushes that gracefully welcome all to our church. They cut off the dead, woody branches because they promise no new life and prune leggy branches to make way for new branches that will sprout from the base of the bush and produce gorgeous roses through the spring and summer. And so it is with us.

At times we must let go of those things that stunt our growth. Be it anger, fear, disappointment, anxiety or sheer inertia from enduring this ongoing pandemic, we need God's love and each other to help us let go of all that stuff that gets in the way of growing into that unique person God has created each one of us to be. If the pandemic has taught us anything it is that we need community. Without it we die. We are cut off from our source of life and we wither on the vine. We become isolated and lost. Hope is replaced by despair, robbing us of having any sense of purpose in our lives.

Jesus invites us to make our home in him as his disciples. We do this by following his commandments to love God and our neighbor. This means we open our hearts and dare to risk being truly present to one another and all those we encounter as we go about our daily lives. And, the really good news is that when we do, we find that God loves us just as we are, with all our hurts, our successes, our sins, our dreams and our brokenness. And, when we begin to believe this we cannot help but reach out because we see ourselves in each other. It is about being and staying connected on a deep and substantive level no matter where life

² Eugene Peterson, *The Message*.

³ David Lose,

finds us, be it here at church in *Corno Del Mar, southern California, or even to the moon and back.*

Fifty-two years ago two young astronauts, Buzz Aldrin and Neal Armstrong, made history by walking on the moon. After the Lunar Module landed on the moon's surface Aldrin radioed to NASA to request a moment of silence to mark this incredible event. What followed few knew about this because the press did not cover it. Over 260,000 miles from earth Aldrin took out a small communion kit that had been blessed by his pastor in his church in Texas. He says:

In the radio blackout, I opened the little plastic packages which contained the bread and the wine. I poured the wine into the chalice our church had given me. In the one-sixth gravity of the moon, the wine slowly curled and gracefully came up the side of the cup. Then I read the scripture, 'I am the vine, you are the branches. Whosoever abides in me will bring forth much fruit...Apart from me you can do nothing.'⁴

Life is about connections. Jesus says "Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you."⁵ When we do we become more of the real, true person God intends for us to be. *Because we are, I am.*

Amen.

⁴ Eric Metaxas.

⁵ Peterson.