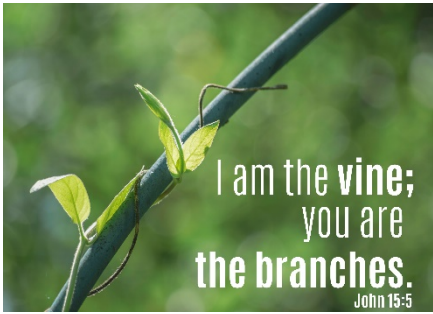


ARE YOU CONNECTED?



It's a simple enough question. It's a yes or no answer. You either are or you aren't. Connected, we are alive and bearing fruit. Disconnected, we are dead and fruitless. But there can't be a more important question for you personally or for the world in which we live. To what or whom are you connected or disconnected? How do you know? Consider the ramifications and horror of being disconnected. Your connection to Christ is absolutely critical. Nothing could be more important because you can do nothing apart from Him. Since this is true, isn't it a

question to be asking yourself and every person you encounter? And yes, it absolutely is your business (to what or to whom those around you are connected) because who wants to live in a pile of dead twigs and branches with no hope or future? You care, therefore, you are willing to ask, "Are you connected?" Your future and the hope of those around you depends on it.

A newspaper reporter went to interview a successful entrepreneur. "How did you do it?" he asked. "How did you make all this money?" "I'm glad you asked," the entrepreneur replied. "Actually, it's a rather wonderful story. You see, when my wife and I married, we started out with a roof over our heads, some food in our pantry, and five cents between us. I took that nickel, went down to the grocery store, bought an apple, and shined it up. Then I sold it for ten cents." "What did you do then?" the reporter asked. "Well," he said, "then I bought two more apples, shined them up, and sold them for twenty cents." The reporter thought this would be a great human-interest story. "Then what?" the reporter asked excitedly. "Then my father-in-law died and left us \$20 million," the businessman said. That man prospered not because of his own ingenuity, **but because he was connected.**

Who wouldn't want to be connected to a rich relative, a successful patent, the winning team, the perfect investment? Actually - YOU. **Apart from Christ, you can do nothing.** Keep repeating this life-changing, hope-giving, future-providing truth: Jesus is the Vine and you are a connected branch. Apart from Him, you can and will do nothing.

When Jesus spoke about vineyards, the people could identify, just as any person in Michigan would know about fruit orchards, or in Iowa would know about corn, or in Mississippi about cotton. It didn't make any difference whether or not you were a farmer or in the business. You had grown up around it enough that you would be very familiar with it. But the listeners also knew that the vineyard was a symbol of their nation. In America, we think of amber waves of grain, apple pie and baseball, but in Israel, they thought of their nation as a vineyard.

Over the Temple in Jerusalem, was carved a gold leaf grapevine as a symbol of national unity. Therefore, when Jesus was speaking using the metaphor of a vine, branches, gardener, fruit - He was speaking in the most intimate of terms - He was speaking in terms of what they knew, loved, and depended upon for the stability of their commerce because grapes were a cash crop. In other words, to not pay close attention to the vines in the vineyard would be just as foolish as not paying attention to the corn crop in America.

The message concerning the Vine and the branches gives us and the world around us lasting hope and true unity. If America is going to have true unity, it will be through a return to the Lord who unifies us in Himself. (Consider the upcoming National Day of Prayer on May 6 and

the unifying theme, “LORD, pour out Your LOVE, LIFE, AND LIBERTY” from 2 Corinthians 3:17.) God doesn’t leave us on our own, but by grace grafts us into the Vine where there is love, life and liberty. **Any other unity will quickly wither and pass away.** Through the strength of the Vine and the care of the Gardener, we bear His fruit. And as people connected to God and each other, we hear Jesus tell us that a Christian is never a lone branch on the vine. The Vine produces many branches and the branches intertwine and support one another in order to produce a harvest. We need to remain, or abide, in the Vine but we also need the support of each other to produce fruit.

The pandemic has forced us to be connected in ways that aren’t familiar and proving most difficult - in person but six feet apart, working from home - alone, mask to mask, continuing to be leery of mass gatherings of any kind. Jesus cares about our relationship with Him **and with each other.** Jesus gives us a picture to describe the relationship He envisions. Jesus pictures Himself as the one True Vine and His followers are the branches that grow off of Him. God the Father is the Gardener. Jesus is **THE** source of the Christian life. Jesus is one with God and He is the Vine to which all branches are connected - joined to the one True Vine and, therefore, to each other.

Jesus says that “if anyone does not remain in Me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.” Jesus is not just talking about those who have never been believers, He is also talking about those who have been in Christ, branches of the Vine, but have fallen away and no longer produce fruit. We are not to judge whether another branch is fruitful or not! God does the pruning, not us. **But we are to have a sense of urgency about those people who are noticeably disconnected from the Vine - from the Word and Sacrament.**

Why does this happen? “Apart from Me you can do nothing.” This is so difficult for people to accept. It appears that they are doing just fine - without worship, without fellowship, without daily Bible reading. Grapevines would rather produce shoots and leaves than grapes. They look lush and green, but ultimately, they are only good for decoration. They need the constant care of the Gardener who works through means - Word and Sacrament - to nurture us, prune us and produce the fruit of His will.

The truth of the matter is - **the quickest and best way to reach out** to those who have strayed from worship and fellowship with the greatest sense of urgency is **through the many branches that see disconnected friends** in their own neighborhoods, at their work, at the store, at games, at track meets and sometimes even at family gatherings.

You know the now popular phrase, “**See something, say something.**” If you ever wondered whether or not you should say anything, hear the words of Jesus - loud and clear! It is a serious thing, a dangerous thing, a spiritual life and death thing to be disconnected. It only takes six weeks to begin a habit of being disconnected - absent from worship, neglectful in personal devotions and prayer, hardened in grudges, hatred and prejudice and withholding of forgiveness, resentful to circumstances and blaming God - all serious matters that disconnect from the Vine and cause separation from the branches. Samuel Johnson has said, “Habits are first cobwebs, then cables...the chains of habit are too weak to be felt until they are too strong to be broken.” God’s grace and forgiveness at the cross and through the empty tomb are the **ONLY** means strong enough to break through the separation of sin.

C.S. Lewis wrote, "God has designed the human machine to run on Himself. He Himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. That is why it is no good asking God to make us happy without bothering about religion. God cannot give happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing."

Jesus is the Vine. We are the branches. It is He who also links us to one another. We not only have connections in high places, we also have connections in low places and places in between. We are connected to one another as branches linked to the vine of Christ. Realistically, we live in a world that can be awfully lonely whether you are at the top or at the bottom. We need to affirm and embrace the idea that we are a family when connected to Christ. God desires this connection for every person we encounter in this life. That makes every branch an evangelist - one who shares the hope and joy found only in Christ. Who could be lonely with such a connection?

Apart from Him we can do nothing, because apart from Him we are dead. Dead, lifeless, dried up branches. But abiding in Him, we not only have life, but His promise: that we will produce fruit. **Please, please notice this important truth in this week's Gospel:** there are no commands to produce fruit in these verses - **only the promise of fruit when we are connected to Him.** The command is to abide in Christ. As we do so, He will work in you and through you, producing the fruit of lips that confess His name, and the fruit of love that loves as He has loved us. And so the key is not anything in us or what we do, but in Christ and what He has done, does continually and has promised to keep doing. And connected to Him, His love becomes our love, His compassion our compassion, His life our life. A life to live, a life to lay down for others, a life that will never end.

Your English District Evangelization Team works closely with the Office of National Mission and Rev. Dr. Mark Wood. The Synod has produced excellent, fresh, new resources that accentuate the urgency to be connected to Christ and to share this Gospel truth with the world. "Every One His Witness" and the Re:Vitality resource "Connect to Disciple" equip us as branches to rejoice in all the eternal blessings of being connected to Christ. They also equip branches with the Word of God that longs for no one to be separated (and thus dead) from the Vine. Please be encouraged to share your stories of the joy and hope that is found from being connected to Christ. Send your stories to this email: 1evangelizationteam@englishdistrict.org What a joy to see the world around us as those whom God desires to be connected to Him. For apart from Christ, we can do nothing. Once again, thanks be to God for the joy He gives us as together we abide in Him and share with urgency His relational Gospel with the world.

In Christ Alone,
Pastor John Diener
Galatians 2:20