

Sermon – “Staying Connected”

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

Sunday, May 2, 2021

Blythe Denham Kieffer, D. Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

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. Hear now God’s holy word.

*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. Amen.*

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. Amen.*

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 of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

One of the first gifts I received from Peter is a gold bracelet which belonged to his mother. Since his mom died a week before his college graduation and this is one of the few pieces of jewelry he remembers her wearing, this bracelet has special meaning for both of us. Inlaid within the gold bracelet are vines and leaves. I rarely wear the bracelet without giving thanks for the presence of Peter’s mom in his life and Peter’s presence in my life. What a beautiful and powerful metaphor is the vine and branches to remind us of the importance of “staying connected” with Christ, whose presence is integral in our becoming on the journeys we travel.

When Peter attended Yale, he had the privilege of taking an American literature class from Dr. Richard Brodhead who later became the President of Duke University. Peter was fascinated with Brodhead who was a dynamic lecturer. Over the years, Peter shared with me what he learned from Dr. Brodhead about the meaning of the Mississippi and the raft on which Huck and Jim traveled in Mark Twain’s novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Written in 1884, this novel is a story about an unexpected friendship forged on the Mississippi River between Huck, a young boy who is escaping the restraints of a society forcing him either to conform to civilized life and religion or to live with an abusive, alcoholic father, and Jim, a black man who is escaping another restraint of society, America’s original sin: 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 the Mississippi, the same year Presbyterian abolitionists founded our congregation) and 1845.

Huck and Jim are both seeking freedom and self-discovery on the river which symbolizes a spirit of regeneration and baptism. Shall we gather by the river? By removing themselves from society with its restraints and communing with nature and one other, each discovers a new appreciation for God’s creation and all they hold in common as human beings.

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 is 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 John's text, it is also 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.*

A decade ago I had the opportunity to spend some quality time sitting along the Mississippi at a weekend Spiritual Retreat at Pere Marquette. I was at an "in-between place" in my life, suspect in the eyes of the established religious authority, and wondering where God would call me next to serve. I found myself drawn to the banks during our intentional 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. Once again on the shore of the Mississippi, I was reminded that 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.

As I drove home on the river road that Sunday 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 toward New Orleans to the adventures of boyhood friendship written by Mark Twain; this long and broad river with its myriad of branched tributaries has sustained and nourished life, like a vine, throughout the years.

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