

Love is the Greatest!

May 2, 2021

UMC Geneva IL

Today's Gospel lesson from John is all about staying connected to Christ. All of us, however, have moments in life when we seem to lose our connection, our relationship with Christ. These are times when it seems that the Lord is not answering our prayers. Times when it seems as though God is not talking to us and all has gone silent.

Now, I had something similar to that happen to me on my latest trip to Atlanta this past Monday. As I was leaving the airport and heading towards entering a 14-lane expressway through downtown Atlanta, suddenly my Apple Maps stopped talking to me. I could see that Maps was running but suddenly lost the voice of the GPS to talk me through the road changes I needed to make. Believe me...I was alarmed! How would I find my way? So I managed to pull over to a gas station. Turned everything off on my iPhone and restarted it. Same problem. It seemed that I didn't have enough bars to establish the connection for voice right when I needed it the most.

We have times like that in our lives when it may seem that we are all alone, don't we. It seems we are walking in the dark. We listen for God's voice or God's direction, and we cannot seem to connect. We can't find the signal. Have we been cut off? Has God forgotten or abandoned us? What's going on?

Jesus, in his farewell discourse to his disciples, on the eve of his crucifixion, attempts to prepare them for the loss and isolation they will experience after his death. And he uses some pretty jarring language to describe what life is like when his disciples – then and now – get disconnected from him. He talks about "cutting." He speaks of "pruning." He describes dead branches being "dragged away" to be "thrown onto a fire."

So, what happens when we find ourselves disconnected from Jesus – our Savior – the way, the truth and the life? Well...we end up like that dead branch I referred to in my children's sermon. That branch happened to be one of many that recently fell from the beautiful Linden tree in our front yard. Every week before I mow the lawn I have to go out there and pick up a half dozen or more dead branches. While I don't burn them (that's against the law here in Geneva)

I do break them down and cram them into a recyclable yard waste bag to be picked up at the curb and hauled away.

Today's reading from John's Gospel emphasizes the importance of abiding in Christ. Christ is the Vine. We are the branches. And when we stay connected to Christ – we flourish and bear fruit – much fruit. But when we don't abide in Christ. When we get disconnected from him, look out! Why? Because we end up like those dead branches I pick up in my yard every week: brittle, broken, and not very useful. So...how are you feeling today? Do you feel connected to Christ? Or disconnected?

My friend Pastor David Lose* points out that one of the challenges of modern life is the paradox that while we're more connected than ever, many of us feel increasingly isolated. Covid 19 certainly has not helped in this regard. Fact is, as Pastor David points out, many people today have tons of friends on Facebook but few friends they actually see and talk to in person. We're "linked-in" with countless people around the globe by internet yet loneliness, depression and other mental health illnesses are on the rise. While drowning in information, news and entertainment, we long for real, meaningful relationships.

There's a huge difference between being "connected" and experiencing genuine relationships. Mere connection – in and of itself – doesn't suffice, does it! What we need...what we crave are real, genuine relationships. I know I do! (I won't soon forget a discussion I had with several parishioners a while back when one of them blurted out, "I'm done with superficial! I need relationships that are real, honest and genuine.")

Now...to be in a real relationship entails ups and downs, give and take, vulnerability and the very real possibility of getting hurt. The same is true for community. As Pastor Lose* puts it, "Communities, we tend to forget, are made up of real people...some nice, some not so nice, but all of us have our days and tend to act like jerks from time to time. And being in community means dealing with that...sometimes running into someone who's being a jerk, and at other times recognizing when we're the ones being the jerk. And then working it out. No, relationships and community aren't easy.

Part of what Jesus is saying is that by being connected to him, we are also able to be connected with each other. Because what Jesus invites us to do is to be real, to be honest about who we are and what we are, to confess our hopes and fears, our dreams and disappointments, our accomplishments and failures, our blessings and our sins...to know that in Christ we are accepted, loved and forgiven. And in light of God's acceptance of us, we can then turn and try to accept each other, living with the imperfections of even our best relationships and communities because we know ourselves to be imperfect and flawed, yet also loved."

When we individually and corporately abide in Jesus and his love – we in turn can bear the fruit of love...his love: Unconditional, "patient and kind. Not envious or boastful, arrogant or rude. A love that doesn't insist on its own way, is not irritable or resentful; that does not rejoice in wrong-doing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. A love that never ends."

Talk about abiding, as the Apostle Paul so eloquently puts it, "Faith, hope and love abide. But the greatest of these is love!" Indeed! Love is the greatest! Amen.

Rev. Rich Darr, Sr. Pastor

*Rev. David Lose, "Getting Real," *Working Preacher*, April 29, 2012