

“Vines and Branches”

Valley Presbyterian Church – May 22, 2022

Confirmation Sunday Rev. Dr. John Wahl John 15:1-4, 12-17

At the home where I grew up, the backstop for our makeshift, front-yard baseball field was a planting area filled with vinca vines. I can only hazard a guess as to how many baseballs, tennis balls, and wiffle balls must have been lost in that dense foliage over the years.

Sometimes, that vinca would start growing in places where it was not supposed to be, so it was our job to remove it. But, whenever I pulled up one plant, several more would come with it; connected as they were by sprawling, underground roots. They were not, as it appeared, many different plants, but were linked together by unseen connections.

The image of the vine – introduced here by Jesus as the last of his “I AM” statements in the Gospel of John – brings to life this idea of hidden connection. Jesus is the vine and the Father is the vine grower. The vine needs the vine grower for its optimal growth and abundance. It will produce more fruit if it is cared for. The vine grower needs the vine to produce, to make possible sustenance and life. It is an image that animates relationship, reliance, belonging.

And just as there is a connected relationship between the vine grower and the vine, Jesus promises us that – in the same way – the vine and the branches are intricately, inevitably linked together. The branches bear fruit, but only because they are connected to the vine and cared for by the vine grower. Bearing fruit depends on connection, on belonging. As soon as you think you can produce anything on your own, strictly from your own efforts, completely independently, you are likely to fall short.¹

This is not to say that we should not strive for independence, especially as young people. As we grow, it is important to learn to care for ourselves, to make wise decisions and use sound judgement. And yet, as we grow and mature, we need to remember our connectedness; that we already are and are meant to be in relationship, to belong.

¹ Karoline Lewis, *John: Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentary*

This rite of confirmation is a symbol of belonging. At the conclusion of their classes and scripture study and service work, we welcome these young people to be members of the church, with all of the privileges and responsibilities that entails. They are now eligible to vote and have voice in congregational meetings, to potentially be elected to and serve as officers in the church. Membership also means that they are choosing to hold their fellow church people in prayer, to participate as disciples and servants of Christ, to contribute their gifts and resources for the good of the wider community. Because we are all connected, we each belong.

So, how can you bear fruit? What are the ways that an individual branch might look beyond itself and exhibit compassion and mutuality? We have talked extensively during confirmation class about how, by grace, God has gifted each of us in different ways. We may not all possess the same talents, interests, or ways of thinking; we might not even yet realize what our particular gifts are, but we believe that – because we are connected to the vine and to each other – we all have a place, a purpose, and a role to play in this body of Christ.

But the truth is, bearing fruit in the way God has gifted you can be risky business. It will reveal that you are not independent; it will expose that you are connected to the vine and your fellow branches; it will show the world that you are not self-sufficient. Many people believe this reveals weakness, that you should break free of these ties and look out for yourself, for your own interests; that being cut off will win you autonomy.

In the face of this risk – of being exposed for our connectedness – Jesus calls us friends; not servants who don't understand what their master wants of them, but friends that hold shared values and a common purpose. Jesus loves us so much that he reveals everything the Father can ever want from us: to care for one another.²

Thus, Jesus says: “This is my commandment: love each other, just as I have loved you.” This is not just another project on our to-do lists, and not an easy one at that. If we're honest, we will admit that the “other” we are asked to love is, like ourselves, a mix of loveable and hard-to-love. The seemingly simple act of loving one another is often demanding. It asks for sacrifice, empathy, forgiveness, compassion, energy, thoughtfulness, and wisdom; it requires time and attention – the most precious and scarce things we have.

Trying to love one another is almost surely a recipe for guilt-ridden disaster, in which a commandment becomes a burden leading to burnout. This is not the

² Meda Stamper from *WorkingPreacher.com*

gospel; it is not what Jesus meant, and not what he said. Instead, we must key in on the commandment's final phrase, "just as I have loved you."³

The love of Jesus for his disciples is the source of the disciples' love for one another. Often, we interpret this phrase to mean that Jesus' love is the example or model for our love: he calls us to the same kind of welcoming, radical love that he shows. While that is true, it is not nearly enough. Jesus' love is also the fount of our love, the ever-flowing spring of the love that flows through the disciples. Loving one another is not meant to be a task, a burden, a chore; but a way of life; a natural outworking of being loved.

As branches that are connected to the vine, we are called to love one another in response to the love that has been shown to us. Jesus has connected us to one another, has blessed each of us with different gifts, and challenged us to do what we were created to do: not going it alone, but bearing the good fruit of compassion, mutuality, and care. A tree doesn't try to bear fruit; healthy branches just do it. When we ground our belonging in God and draw from the fount of Jesus' love for us, then love for others can and sometimes even will flow out from us as naturally as a stream. Amen.

³ Patrick Johnson, "As I Have Loved You"