

WELCOME 13th October 2019 – 18 Pentecost '19 C

John 15:1-8

Good morning! Welcome to worship today! Special welcome guests & visitors! It's our privilege & joy to serve you in worship.

Remember when you were in primary school...all you needed was a handball, cricket bat or some sort of footy & in minutes you had a set of friends. Just show up at the playground get a game going & bam! Instant connection. Today it seems you need an App for that. From Facebook to Instagram, WeChat to WhatsApp, LinkedIn FaceTime...at every electronic turn there are Apps designed to connect us with others all over the world.

But what does it mean to be "connected"? Social media promised us a connected world but according to all the relevant research...has left us more isolated than ever. You know without doing any research that not every connection is equal...So...With whom are you **really** connected? Which of those connections strengthen you instead of drain you? Which connections do you invest in for life for the long-haul?

Jesus said there is one pivotal connection that causes our lives to grow & flourish & makes our communities thrive. He said it's the connection of a branch to the vine. *"I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, & I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing."* Jn 15:5

There is only one connection that is life-giving in every season. One connection that will not fail you in any circumstance. A connection with Jesus. He is with you, holding onto you, loving you pouring his life into you & will not let you go. Even when it feels like you are cut down by life, hanging by a thread: new growth is ahead; new life will come. That's his promise. We'll experience & celebrate that together today –

Let's pray...

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Almighty God, you are our Father. You created us for life, for abundance, for your purpose. Pour your Holy Spirit through us as we gather among your people around your Word. Draw us deeper into your heart so we know you intimately, trust you completely, & live the fullness & fruitfulness only you can bring. Let the world see your life & love in us, bringing glory & praise to you...through Jesus Christ. Amen

18 PENTECOST '19 C – I CAN RELATE TO THAT: A BRANCH TO THE VINE

FAITH CHAT:

1. It's 2 a.m. & you're waiting on the ambulance. Who do you ring to meet you at the hospital or come sit with your kids? Can you name more than 1? How many?
2. Other than a family member, who is the person in this Christian community to whom you feel most closely connected? Why? Would they be 1 of your 2 a.m. calls?

You've probably never heard of Robin Dunbar. Or Dunbar's number? Prof Dunbar is a British social psychologist/anthropologist...Here are his numbers: 5, 15, 50, 150, & a couple of others: 500, 1500. What? You don't think there's anything special about those numbers? Well...think back to the 1st question. It's 2 a.m...Who do you call for the biggest of all big favours? Crunch time? Back's against the wall? If you're like most people, acc to Prof Dunbar, you probably have 5 or fewer people you call your intimate friends. The 2 a.m. phone call people. The people you ring when the Dr says "cancer." You admit an addiction/\$\$ crisis/divorce. Dr Dunbar says most of us have about 15 best friends...people you would gladly take to the airport or watch their house/pets/garden while they're on holidays. They'd do the same for you. Pick up your kids if your car breaks down...for a weekend away.

Most of us have about 50 good friends. These are the people you have around for dinner now & again...share birthdays/special events...kids/grandkids do something they see the photos/find out first. Then there are the 150 friends. These are the people you invited to your wedding or your 21st birthday. The neighbour a few houses down you chat with while you work in the garden...traded cuttings or tips ...neighbourhood BBQ. Now...That 150...that's Dunbar's number... The 150 layer is the important one: this defines the people with whom you have real reciprocal relationships...w/ whom you feel connected & willingly do favours. There seems to be a limit...a natural cut-off switch...that keeps us from being able to maintain more than 150 genuine relationships at a time. (family? maybe/maybe not)

Now we can argue about the specifics (individual #s) but even though there is some flexibility, there's not much, & it mostly depends on how weak or strong you want your friendships to be. You know as well as I, we have a limited amount of time, emotional energy (social capital) & we choose to invest it thinly in more people, or thickly in fewer people. But you can't exceed these limits. Realtor w/ 6000 contacts

Oh...last 2 numbers...Acquaintances & people you recognize on sight. Maybe don't even remember their names...can't place where or why but you're sure you know them...

With whom are you **really** connected? Which of those connections strengthen you instead of drain you? Which connections do you invest in for life for the long-haul? I laughed with the realtor about his 6000 contacts...an unrealistic # of tenuous murky connections most of which are to his financial benefit. Oh I appreciate the sense of satisfaction he might get if he sells me a house, but I know part of that satisfaction is his fee. I am to him a financial relationship far & above any personal link he might feel for me.

But he's not that unusual...We are a people of productivity. It is, for the most part, the standard by which we live & measure our success. It is built into the fabric of our lives. Productivity is the basis of our economic system. Produce & you are rewarded Do not produce; you suffer. Educationally students who do well (who produce) are recognized/applauded while those who don't often get lost in the system. This isn't always evil or demeaning or with bad intent...it just IS...We are a people of productivity

I've known pastors who wrote out monthly lists for their church council that noted productivity...home visits, nursing home communions/worship services, counselling hours, study/research time/days off...We have been convinced that productivity is the goal & only the most productive survive.

I wonder if that isn't how many of us live our spiritual lives. Even in the church we hear the unmistakable message that bigger is better & more is more. We laud the mega & the multiplied churches...I plead guilty as charged...I know I hear *I am the true vine, & my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch of mine that doesn't produce fruit, & he prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more... I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, & I in them, will produce much fruit....* I hear the word "produce" 5X in these 8 vs...as an accusation...I see a heavenly tally sheet...and I wonder...about me compared with...that guy/church? How I stack up against your expectations...How I measure up against...?

That's one way to read this passage...to focus exclusively on the branches... on ourselves & what we are supposed to get up to as branches: How we summon up the capacity to bear much fruit. How we muscle up & produce. How we knuckle down & make more get bigger...I've preached that sermon before.

But the minute I focus completely on the “branch” *my part in the story* I miss the real heart of what Jesus is saying... “*I am the true grapevine, & my Father is the gardener.*” In John’s gospel, this is the last of 7 “I Am” statements Jesus makes. 7x Jesus says “I Am ____” as a way of leading his hearers to trust that he is in fact the fullest revelation of the Father’s loving/saving will for all people. 7x he says “I Am ____” as an invitation to trust him for everything...especially for life in its most abundant & complete fullness & satisfaction in relationship with the Father. “I am” Jesus says, the bread of life – the light of the world – the gate for the sheep – the good shepherd - the resurrection & the life - the way the truth & the life — the true vine.

In this instance, on the night of his betrayal, Jesus has just led the disciples out of the upper room at the conclusion of their final meal together & toward the Mt of Olives. All of that was Jn 13/14...but Jesus continues teaching the 11 Jn 15/16/17 up to his arrest in Jn 18. Some scholars think they leave the meal & walk past the Temple & above the door of the Temple was a grapevine fashioned in gold. The grapevine throughout the OT was a metaphor for Israel. (Ps 80, Is 5, Jer 2) God’s intent for his “vine/people” was always good, but things always went bad. The “vine” rebelled. The “vine” bore something other than choice grapes/fine wine the Father sought. So when prophets spoke of/to the vine it was always about to be uprooted-cast out-punished. The image was loaded with judgment-wrath-destruction.

But Jesus takes this image & casts the light back on himself...*I Am the true vine*. I Am what you could not be...I Am what you are intended to be...I Am bearing fruit that the Father has always desired because you would not/could not. But instead of judgment...it’s grace/forgiveness/invitation... *I Am the true vine*. I Am what the Father intends for you to be & He’s the gardener who grafts you into life only I can provide. I Am what the Father intends for you & he is grafting you into the only true source of life health nourishment strength security well-being. I Am what the Father intends for you & from now on I will make possible in you. *I Am the true vine* who will produce life love joy peace in you & through you.

You see...Jesus is not insisting upon or demanding productivity. He’s not saying “go big or go home.” He wants & offers connection, relationship, & intimacy. “*Don’t let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, Trust also in me. There is more than enough room in my Father’s home. If this were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? When everything is ready, I will come & get you, so that you will always be with me where I am.*” Home. With me. Where I am...That’s the promise. That’s the goal. That’s the intention. That’s the whole purpose of his coming to this earth to die rise & rule in love so that you & I are home with the Father where Jesus is.

Fruit or its lack simply reveals the quality of that connection/intimacy/trust. Fruit or its absence simply shows whether we are living connected or disconnected lives. Fruit production is the natural consequence of staying close to Jesus...holding on to him for dear life...immersing ourselves in his presence & power & living from the strength of his relationship with the Father. We do not choose whether or not we produce fruit. May be a season of lying dormant...renewal. We do, however, choose where we abide & how well we stay connected. *Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.* Jn 15:4 Remain/abide – 8x Jesus uses that word in these verses...It means to dwell, live your days, anchor yourself & rest in the love of God & life he offers in Jesus. That’s not about effort, it’s a gift. It is the way you live in the presence of a loved one. You are w/ them even when you are in different places. They are never far from heart/mind, & the thought of them brings a deep joy. When you are w/ them, words may not be necessary. We are invited to abide, dwell, remain in Christ....to live as if distance or circumstance can’t separate us...because Christ promises they won’t.

How would that change the way we live each day? What if we lived, not in the frantic urgency of what is required of us, not in the grind & drive to produce/build/construct, but rather in the knowledge of God’s love for us...from the assurance that we are the Father’s deeply loved sons/daughters...from the power of Christ living in us. “*The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, & self-control. There is no law against these things!*” – Gal 5:22-23 Jesus says because he is what we could not be he is pruning us so we can grow in these areas. “I am what you could not be, but I am going to grow in you who I am.” Who is he? Perfect love - perfect joy - perfect peace - perfect patience – perfect kindness - perfect goodness - perfect faithfulness - perfect gentleness & perfect self-control. I’m going to grow that in you. How? I’m going to prune/stretch/squeeze you/call you to walk paths that are hard & demanding & put you next to difficult people & confusing circumstances so you can grow more in my likeness...so you can lean more deeply into me...the vine.”

“*I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, & I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing.*” Jn 15:5 There is only one connection that is life-giving in every season. One connection that will not fail you in any circumstance. A connection with Jesus. He is with you, holding onto you, loving you pouring his life into you & will not let you go. Even when it feels like you are cut down by life, hanging by a thread: new growth is ahead; new life will come. That’s his promise in joy & sorrow, exhaustion & ease, plenty & want...you are grafted into a love that goes beyond that, even to the grave & into the kingdom yet to come,

Let's pray with that in mind...Father, fill us with the Spirit of your Son. Let our lives grow only in his strength, only by his love. Shape our lives according to your will and make us more and more like Jesus in all we are. Let nothing separate us from your presence and in all things let our lives bring you glory. In Jesus' Name...Amen.