

John 15:1-8

Lifeline

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama

May 2, 2021

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[Jesus said] “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide 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. ⁵I 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. ⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”

For the Word of God in scripture,
for the Word of God among us,
for the Word of God within us:

Thanks be to God.

I am currently waging a war on quackgrass—at least, I think that’s what it is, based on a Google search. It’s a creeping weed that looks a lot like crabgrass, but has deeper roots. We just dug up an area of our yard for plantings, pulled out what seemed like all the weeds, and covered it with a deep layer of mulch; but in spite of all that effort, every day I go out and find new, little green fingers of quackgrass poking up through the mulch, like they’re waving at me.

So I take my trowel out there and dig down to try and get rid of it, and I find a root system more than half a foot deep, sending underground runners out a yard or

more. All along those underground runners are rhizomes, evenly spaced like a string of add-a-pearls; and often I discover, emerging from those rhizomes, fully formed tufts of grass, inching their way toward the surface. Those baby grasses are sometimes even already green—though they have yet to be in the sun. How do they do that?! The more time I spend with this grass, the more I realize how tenacious it is, and that, what I'm probably doing with all of this digging and yanking-out isn't eradication, but pruning and aeration. That quackgrass, as vigorous and connected as it is, isn't going anywhere.

Which, oddly, makes me think of the church. The late Marj Carpenter, who was, for years, the Missions guru of the Presbyterian Church, used to say that the church has never entirely disappeared from any part of the world in which it's been established. It may go underground for awhile, but it is never eradicated. The roots are too deep. The connections are too strong.

That's what Jesus assures his disciples of in our passage today. It's part of his farewell discourse, as he's preparing them for his coming death. Though he tries to reassure them, they are understandably frightened. They're afraid of being left behind and of being disconnected and destroyed. The previous chapter is where he tells them that they know the place where he is going, and Thomas cries out, "We

don't know where you're going. How can we know the way?!" [14:5] To which Jesus responds, "I am the way, the truth and the life."

As he then segues into the metaphor of vine and branches, I think about that quackgrass. The new shoots don't have to know the way—connected as they are to the root and the runners, they can't get lost. And all along, they draw moisture and nourishment up from the roots, and sunlight down from the surface. They can't lose their connection to the lifeline, because they are part of it. They abide in it.

Last fall, the Stewardship Team asked you all to respond to questions about what you value most in our church. There was a whole list of things that came back, but one thing that we heard, over and over, was "connection."

And the other evening in the brainstorming session about the future of Faith Formation and Congregational Life, Nicole asked people to share about ways in which they have been changed by the church. One thread, among many, that kept being repeated was "connection."

And when she asked us to dream about what we want our church to look like in the future—there it was again: "connection."

We are here because this congregation helps us feel connected, and we want to nurture those connections—to God, to one another, and to the wider world. But when I say we are "here," I'm not limiting that to this literal, physical space.

We've learned not to be limited by that, in this time of pandemic. Still, that hasn't been the case for everyone. From some who didn't have ties, this has been a period of devastating isolation.

As the pandemic stretched on, more and more articles began to appear in newspapers and online about the mental health impacts of loneliness and isolation. Those impacts can be extreme. A report from the Center for Constitutional Rights lists the effects of long-term, solitary confinement as "...obsessive ruminations, confused thought processes, an oversensitivity to stimuli, irrational anger, social withdrawal, hallucinations, violent fantasies, emotional flatness, mood swings, chronic depression, feelings of overall deterioration, as well as suicidal ideation."¹

Is it any wonder that violent language and gun violence are surging?

The report quotes one prisoner, Luis Esquivel, who, at the time of the article, had spent thirteen years in solitary. "I feel dead," he says. "It's been thirteen years since I have shaken someone's hand and I fear I'll forget the feel of human contact."² In order to be fully alive, we human beings need to be connected with others.

¹ <https://ccrjustice.org/files/CCR-Factsheet-Solitary-Confinement.pdf>

² Ibid.

And yet, I've come to realize that, even during the worst of the pandemic, I never felt isolated. Now, granted, I was also not completely alone--my husband was with me. That's a huge advantage that not everyone had. But, what I guess I mean to say is that I never felt cut off. I always knew I was connected to you all.

Even as we scrambled to figure things out, I didn't have to make decisions alone—the Session was there, right alongside me, and the Deacons stepped up their work so as not to lose touch with their care groups. The willingness of many of you to participate in video projects like the Welcome statement and the “he is risen” responses for Easter and the Friday Shares meant that we got to see each others' faces; and those times that we got to gather outside, like that first time, for Rally Day, were an amazing shot in the arm. And because of our connectedness to one another and to so many other partners—like presbytery and Faith in Action Alabama and Greater Birmingham Ministries and the Faith-Based Partnership to End Homelessness—because of those connections, whenever new crises like the Racial Reckoning exploded on the scene, I and we always had a way that we could respond. Even from our homes, we were not helpless speak up or to act.

“Abide in me as I abide in you,” Jesus says. “Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. 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.”

Being connected keeps us alive, but it also matters *to whom* or *to what* we are connected. The new quackgrass that’s forming underground, waiting to grow up to the surface, looks exactly like all the other quackgrass to which it’s connected. It’s not going to sprout into broccoli or roses or strawberries—it’s simply going to bear more quackgrass. In the same way, in these dystopian times, many people have connected to groups like Proud Boys or QAnon that feed the lies and resentments of their followers. When those folks emerge from under their rocks, they don’t come bearing love and peace and justice, but fully loaded with the fruits of rage.

Little by little, we are beginning to emerge. I thank God for that. Yet, I even thank God for our time underground, because our root system held, and our lifeline continued—even strengthened. Over the past year, I’ve seen a flowering of patience and grace, openness and love in you. I’ve seen an even more fervent commitment to justice. In other words, I’ve seen you bearing the fruits of Christ, because he is our root, our vine, our lifeline; and the more deeply connected we are to him, the more we look and act like him.

As the current crisis eases (we hope!), let’s continue to nurture that connection with even deeper commitment, and let’s remember those who are out there on their

own. Some of them may have been cut off by their community or even their church—because of their sexuality or gender identity; because of their race or their immigration status; because they were poor or they had no shelter. Like a vine clinging on to a new surface, we need to reach out to them. We need to connect them to our lifeline: to Christ, and to Christ’s people here and beyond this place.

It’s a matter of life and death. Without connection, we shrivel up and die. But with that connection, even in the worst of times, we can flourish—drawing nourishment from Christ, our root. Drawing the sunlight of fellowship from one another. And bearing fruit that fills the world with goodness and draws others into the lifeline of grace. Thanks be to God.