

NLIF Sermon
By Rev. Timothy C. Geoffrion
Yangon, Myanmar
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“How Well-Connected Are You?”
John 15:1-12

Greeting

It's good to be back here with you for a few weeks. The NLIF community is very important to me. So, when I'm gone, I miss being here with all of you.

I'm also very glad that my wife, Jill, is here with me this morning. Many of you know that she's been struggling with her health ever since he had a serious accident in 2016. So, this is the first time in three years that she's been able to return to Myanmar with me. I'm very happy about that, and I'm also grateful to those of you who have prayed for her, and for me.

We're connected to each other in many different ways. And those connections are very meaningful and important in our lives.

Introduction

Today's sermon is on the subject of connections. To get us started, let me ask you a question. “How well-connected are you?” Now, normally when people ask you that question they probably mean, “Are you well connected with the government?” Or, “...with the embassy?” Or, “How good are your connections to the movers and shakers in town?” Or, “...to the people with money who could finance your business or nonprofit?” “How well-connected are you to decision makers or people who could open a door for you?”

But when Jesus talks about connections or being well-connected, he has something quite different in mind. First, he doesn't use the word, “connection,” at all; but second, he does imply it when he talks about our relationships to God, to him, to the world, and to one another.

It is this understanding of connection that we find in our Scripture passage for today, John 15. In these well-known verses, Jesus calls us to think about what and who we are connected to, what gives us life, and what kinds of connections are truly going to be fruitful in our lives. On one hand, this passage is a warning. It warns against trying to live our lives or even serve God in our own power. On the other hand, Jesus is giving an invitation. His invitation is to set aside our own pre-occupation with ourselves and our own desires and ambitions, and instead to take hold of the one relationship that will truly bring us life.

Prayer

Scripture

Sermon

Teaching of John 15

In the first century, agricultural world, all of Jesus' disciples and the readers of John would have been quite familiar with grape vines. So, Jesus draws on this common image to explain to them very important spiritual truths about who he is, who God the Father is, and how his followers are supposed to relate to Jesus.

- A. First of all, Jesus says: "I am the true vine" (15:1) "True" vine implies that there are other vines, other masters, other spiritual guides, other gods that we could attach to. But he is the *true* vine, meaning that what we gain from being attached to him is not available anywhere else or from anyone else. He is the one true source of eternal life—which, in the Gospel of John refers to both a quality of life as well as a quantity. When we accept Jesus Christ as our Savior, the quality of our life changes immediately. And this new life in Jesus continues on forever.

Then he explains the role of God the Father.

- B. God the Father (Jesus' Father) is the vinegrower/gardener. (15:1)
 1. The Father cuts off every branch that does not bear fruit. (15:2)
 2. The Father prunes the fruitful branches so that they will bear even more fruit. (15:2)
 3. You are clean (pruned?) because of the word Jesus spoke to them. (15:3)

In short, he's saying that God is at work in the hearts and minds of all Jesus' followers. God disciplines, corrects, and helps us to become better followers and to be more fruitful in our lives. I don't know exactly what he means, "The Father cuts off every branch that does not bear fruit," but it can't be good. Whatever he means exactly, the point seems to be that each of us has a God-given purpose in life. We're not here to serve ourselves. We're here to serve God. And Jesus was sent to provide a way for us to be well-connected to God and to bear fruit with our lives.

But what does Jesus expect from those who follow him?

- C. Messages to all those who believe in and follow Jesus

To answer this question, let's imagine that Jesus Christ has just come online, and we suddenly have a chance to text with him and ask him our questions! This little dialogue is going to require audience participation. You get to play the role of the inquiring disciple, and I will read Jesus' lines.

D: I can't believe it! Jesus, are you really online?

T: I AM.

D: Can I ask you some questions?

J: Of course.

D: I read your post about the vine and the branches in the Bible. What was your point?

J: Abide in me as I abide in you.

D: I already believe in you, Jesus. What do you mean?

J: The only way for a branch to bear fruit is to remain in the vine. You cannot bear fruit unless you remain in me.

D: Aww. I see.

J: Yes, the one who abides in me will bear much fruit. Apart from me, you can do nothing.

D: But Jesus, I like fruit, but I'm a little lazy. 😊 I really don't want to do that much. Is that OK?

J: Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a useless branch. It withers and is only good for burning.



D: Uh. That doesn't sound good. 😞😞

Tell me again, what's the alternative?

J: If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, you may ask for whatever you wish.

D: Really?! Cool. Anything?

J: Anything that brings glory to my Father.

D: Aww. I see.

J: By bearing fruit, you bring glory to the Father and show yourself to be my disciple.

D: Jesus, I want to bear fruit for God. What should I do?

J: As the Father loved me, so I have loved you. Abide in my love.

D: How can I abide in your love?

J: If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.

D: But Jesus, I'm not you! And there are so many commandments. I am worried that I can't keep them all.

J: There is only one that truly matters. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

D: OK. I will try really, really hard to keep your commandment.

J: You are missing the point.

D: What? I don't understand.

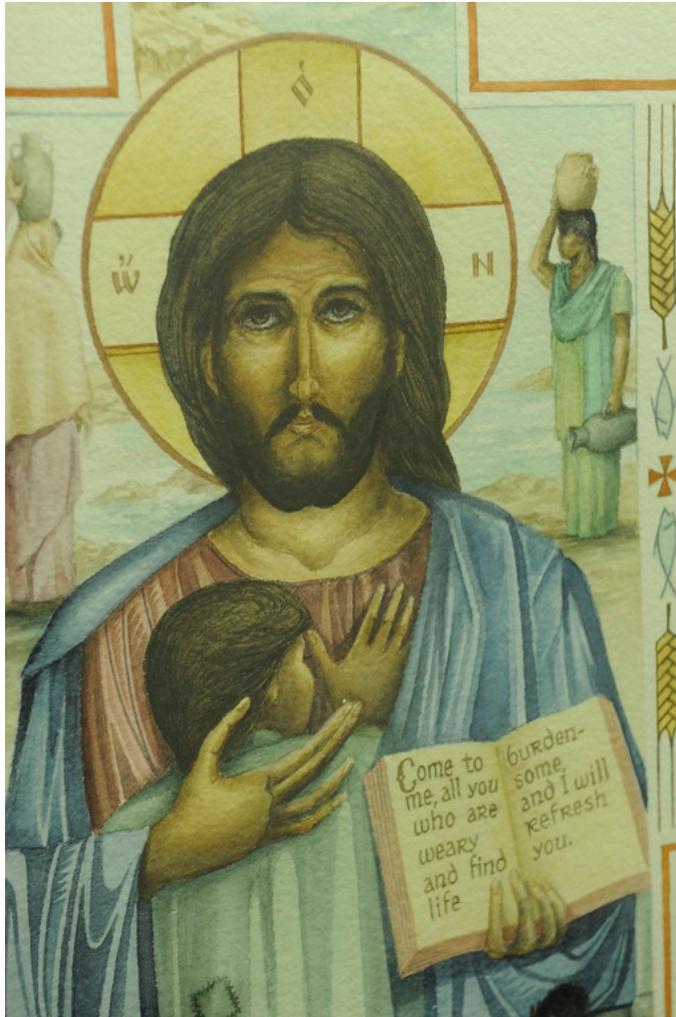
J: Abide in me, and you will keep my commandment.

Abide in my love, and you will love.

Abide in me, and you will bear much fruit.

Abide in me and my love, and you will be my disciple.

Abide in me.



D: Aww. Abide in you. That's the point, isn't it? 😊

Interpretation

Yes, that is the point. God the Father loved Jesus, his son. Jesus loves us. Jesus calls us to live in him so that we can love him and love others. As a branch must remain in the vine to bear fruit, so we must remain in Jesus and remain in his love in order to bear fruit. I don't think that Jesus meant that God will stop loving us if we disobey or fail to obey. Rather, he's saying that the life he came to give us requires a living, loving relationship with God, **marked by faith, trust,**

obedience, and love. When we abide in Christ in this way, our lives will be fruitful, because Jesus will be living and loving through us.

Application

So, how well-connected are you?

- What kind of connection do you have to Jesus?
- Is it a strong connection?
- Is it a fruitful connection?
- Is your connection characterized by obedience and love—love for God, love for Jesus, and love for one another?
- What could you do to abide more fully and deeply in Jesus and his love?

As I think about who Jesus had in mind when he gave this teaching, it seems to me that there are at least three different groups of people that this metaphor was intended to speak to.

Group 1. Those who are confident that they have a lot to contribute to this world

To those of us who are determined to make a difference and have a lot of confidence in ourselves and our own efforts, this passage reminds you, "You can do nothing apart from Jesus." I don't think he meant you can't get out of bed in the morning without Jesus' help. Rather, it means, you can't bear fruit for God in your own strength alone.

To Group 1, this teaching also reminds you that you are not perfect and you are going to need God's correction and discipline from time to time. Are you open to God's pruning in your life? Nobody likes to be pruned, because it's painful. It's embarrassing to have to face our faults and weaknesses. We may feel guilty or ashamed. But your purpose in life is not to look good to yourself or others. Your purpose is to bear fruit for God. But your sin, selfishness and lack of maturity get in the way. Even your accomplishments can get in the way, because our pride and inflexibility can become barriers to the work of Christ within us.

If you are a prideful, stubborn, inflexible person, or even unrepentant, you need God's pruning work. Let go of whatever you're holding on to within yourself. Trust God to shape you through whatever you may be suffering and struggling with. God wants to make you more fruitful, but first he needs to strip away the sin, the doubt, and the self-reliance that is getting in the way. Let God do his work in you, and trust Christ to bear fruit through you in his own time and in his own way.

Group 2. Those who lack confidence in their ability to make a contribution to the world

The only difference between you and the first group is that you lack confidence in yourself while they have too much confidence in themselves; but both of you are relying on yourselves and looking to yourselves to bear fruit. They're optimistic, you're pessimistic. They're hopeful, you're discouraged. They're bold, and you're afraid. They're busy trying to accomplish something, and you're holding back. What are you going to contribute living like that?

What would happen if you stopped feeling inadequate and instead trusted in Christ's adequacy? What if you focused more on cultivating your relationship with Christ and trusted him to work through you? You must believe that God created you to do good works, to bear fruit, and that by actively drawing on Christ's presence in your life, you will be fruitful. So, count on it. Get to work. Believe that you are loved by God and get busy extending that love to others all around you.

Group 3. Those who know about Jesus, but don't yet love or follow Jesus as their Lord and Savior

If you belong in this group, first of all see this passage as an invitation. It's an invitation to believe that God the Father loves you and that God sent Jesus into the world to show you his love, and to teach you how you can have eternal life, full of love, meaning and purpose.

Do not think that you can work hard to save yourself. You cannot. Do not think that you can do enough good works to please God in your own power. You cannot. None of us can. That's the beauty of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. He died for you so that you could be forgiven. He came back to life so that his Holy Spirit can live inside of you and make you fruitful for God. Jesus wants you to believe this message, to trust in him as your Savior, to bear good fruit for the rest of your life, and to remain in his love forever.

Conclusion

No matter whether you are in Group 1, 2, or 3, Jesus' teaching here in John 15 is very important. Jesus is saying, connections matter in life. They're critical. And some connections matter more than others. The most important is our connection to God the Father and Jesus Christ, his son. But our connection has to be more than just belief in God and in Christ. Jesus says, we must abide in him and in his love to bear fruit and to experience the life he came to give us. And the only way we can remain in Christ and Christ's love is by cultivating a close relationship with him, by putting our faith in him, by obeying him, by loving him and by extending the love he gives us to others. Then, our lives will bear fruit and we will experience the fullness of his joy,

This is Jesus' message and invitation to you: "Abide in me."

What is your response going to be?

Prayer