

“The Circle of Life”
John 15:1-12; Numbers 11:16-17

A few weeks back Jean and I went to see the movie, “Avatar.” It has become a smash hit, already grossing over \$2 billion worldwide, and has been nominated for an Academy Award. I decided to go because I wanted to see the 3-D effects. If you are my age, you can remember going to the movies as a kid and getting those paper 3-D glasses. Of course, today, it cost me about twenty times what it did fifty years ago, although the 3-D glasses were much nicer.

Without giving away the plot of the movie I can tell you that a major theme is the interconnectedness of all of life. And one of the methods used to illustrate this in the movie is that each of the blue people possesses a ponytail that at its end looks like a television cable wire that is alive. This pulsating human cable can attach to similar cables in either fellow humans or animals creating a special emotional and intellectual relationship between the two. The blue people can fly on birds and ride wild horses because the joining of the cables creates a bond between humans and beasts.

Now, though the movie is obviously science fiction, interconnectiveness between humanity and nature and between one another is a key element of sustaining and enhancing life. For instance, we now know that the destruction of the Amazon rain forest harms every one of us. The dense vegetation of the rainforests produces over twenty percent of the world’s oxygen. Trees act as the lungs of the planet. We also know that rain forests contain more than fifty percent of the earth’s plant and animal species. And, from these species, many still unknown, drugs for healing are often discovered. Twenty-five percent of western pharmaceuticals contain rainforest ingredients. The destruction of the rainforest eliminates future discoveries of which we cannot even be aware.

Likewise, we observe this interconnectedness in our relationships. In pre-marital counseling I explain to couples that we act out of the patterns in which we grow up. An example of this is every parent’s experience of catching yourself saying to your children those exact words your parents said to you and you swore you would never repeat to your children. Words like: “I’ll give you something to cry about.”

Or: “This spanking is going to hurt me more than you.”

Or: “If you don’t straighten up, I’m going to turn this car around and go right back home.”

For good, or bad, there is an interconnectedness to life that drives, sustains, and directs our thoughts and actions.

And, this interconnectedness is what Jesus explains in our scripture. It is Maundy Thursday, the day before what we now call Good Friday, the time of Jesus’ crucifixion. On this Thursday evening in Jerusalem, Jesus has gathered with his disciples. They have shared a meal together, what we now call the Last Supper. Judas has already left to betray Jesus. After he departs the meal Jesus will be arrested, tortured, and the next day crucified. So, our scripture is part of a discourse in which Jesus offers to his disciples ideas and thoughts that he believes are so important for their lives, and our lives. In these words Jesus speaks not only to the disciples, but every one of us who follows in his footsteps, detailing how we must relate to Jesus and to one another.

“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.”

Every person in Israel understood about vines. They were everywhere, for wine, fruits, and vegetables. In fact, as the symbol for America is the eagle, the symbol for Israel was the vine. And this imagery was especially strong in the Hebrew Bible. Isaiah 5:7: “The vineyard of the Lord...is the house of Israel.” Throughout the Old Testament, Israel is depicted as the vine or vineyard of God. When the Jews drove the Syrians out of Israel in the second century B.C., the emblem on their newly minted coin was a vine. On the front of the Jerusalem Temple’s Holy Place was a huge solid gold vine carrying solid gold grape clusters as tall as a person.

So, when Jesus begins this discourse by saying, “I am the true vine,” every disciple knew that meant Jesus was the source of their spirit, their life, their connection to God. Like any good communicator, Jesus took elements of everyday life that everyone recognized and employed them to explain his message.

For instance, all in his audience understood that the relationship between a vine and its branches had to be nurtured. Pruning the branches, cutting them back might look harmful, but actually enabled the branches to produce more and better fruit. Branches that produce no fruit must be eliminated so they do not suck the important life from the vine and retard the growth of the fruit. All of these, what we might call “gardening tips,” are known to us today whether we are farmers, master gardeners, or just people who took high school biology.

And yet, as simplistic, and commonly acknowledged as these principles are, they are also the key elements of spiritual growth and fruitfulness. We know how a vine and its branches grow in our yards. Jesus is reminding us it works the same way in our hearts and minds.

It is so easy and tempting to allow our branches to flourish and become overgrown with non fruit producing leaves. We allow our life blood, our energy, our time, money, and talents to flow into areas that are not bad, but do not draw us closer to God.

For instance, we all have to work for a living, but must we go to the office on Sunday morning?

Sports is a great physical outlet, but should it eclipse worship or Sunday School or youth group?

What priorities does my checkbook indicate?

Do I set time apart for prayer, Bible reading, helping others?

Does the energy, direction, life giving power of my life flow from Jesus?

Does the vine of Jesus shape my thoughts, words, actions, who I am and who I strive to be?

When I look at my life, is it producing Christ like fruit, or does it need a serious pruning?

The Spanish author Miguel de Unamuno tells of an ancient Roman aqueduct, located near the city of Segovia. The aqueduct, a sort of elevated trestle over which water flows, was constructed in the year A.D. 109. For 1,800 years, the aqueduct carried cool water from the mountains to the hot and thirsty city. As many as sixty generations depended on this marvel of engineering for their drinking water.

Then came another generation, in more recent years, who said to each other, “This aqueduct is an architectural marvel. It’s a historical treasure that ought to be preserved. We should give it a well-earned rest.”

That’s exactly what they did. They detoured the water flow away from the ancient stones and channeled it through modern pipes. They put up historical markers so tourists would know who had constructed the aqueduct, and for what purpose. They celebrated the fact that their city’s water system was now modern in every way.

But then, a strange thing began to happen. The Roman aqueduct began to fall apart. The sun beating down on its dry mortar, without the constant flow of water to cool it, caused it to crumble. In time, the massive structural stones threatened to fall. What eighteen centuries of hard service had not been able to destroy, a few years of idleness nearly did.

If we neglect or cut off the life giving love Jesus offers us, our spirits will slowly, but surely, begin to dry out, crumble, and die.

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

When we disconnect from Jesus, our spirits wither and die. But what we often forget is that same interconnectedness applies to our relationships with one another. Disconnects within our family, whether because of work, or selfishness, or poor time choices, cause those relationships to wither and die. Disconnects between friends or employees or relatives all suffer the same fruitless growth. And, the same is true here among us. When we do not stay connected with one another, relationships wither.

Now, this is difficult. Because a church is made up of imperfect, sinful people. Memorize this saying, write it on your heart. The Church is not a club for saints. It is a hospital for sinners.

We are surrounded by people just like us. Some of us are struggling with deteriorating relationships. Some are facing divorce. Others are coping with life threatening illnesses. Some fight the demons of alcohol or drugs. There are those of us who are desperate to help our children. Others face unemployment or financial difficulties. Many of us have just made bad choices. No one in this sanctuary is immune to the trauma of human existence.

And that is why it is so important for us to love one another. Jesus does not call us to compete with one another, or argue with one another, or judge one another, but to love one another. Now, this is hard to do. Because it is easier, and initially more comforting, to point out the sin of others. It diverts attention from my sin and makes me think at least I don’t have that in my life. But pointing fingers distracts needed attention and energy from our struggles. And eventually those pointing fingers will point back at us. But when we love one another, we support one another, we help one another heal, we learn from one another.

When Jesus spoke these words to his disciples, he knew those same disciples would go out that very night and betray and deny him. That very night. And yet, he continued to love them and gave his life for them. By loving one another we produce fruit in other people’s lives, and in our own.

One Christmas, Mom decreed that she was no longer going to remind her children of their thank-you note duties. As a result, their grandmother never received acknowledgements of the generous checks she had given. The next year things were

different, however. “The children came over in person to thank me,” the grandmother told a friend triumphantly. “How wonderful!” the friend exclaimed. “What do you think caused the change in behavior?” “Oh, that’s easy,” the grandmother replied. “This year I didn’t sign the checks.”

We may each find differing ways to express our love and maintain the bonds between us. But it is essential that we discover avenues to establish and share that love and support.

“The Circle of Life”

We often forget the circle of life runs right through us. If we falter in our connection to Christ, then the branches that flow from us to families, church, friends, will not receive the life giving energy they require.

This morning, at our 11:15 service, we will ordain and install our new elders. They are a vital link that flows from Jesus through them to this church. Today, they take vows that decree their willingness to be branches of love and faithfulness that will energize each one of you who is a member of this congregation.

On this day, let each one of us examine both our connection to Jesus and to one another and ask ourselves: What kind of fruit am I producing?

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