

“Well-Connected”
Acts 8:26-40; 1 John 4:7-21;
John 15:1-8

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Loneliness. That’s an upbeat way to start a sermon, isn’t it? Loneliness.

Maybe it’s because the Stephen Ministers have been thinking about loneliness that I found myself looking at some research going on recently about the nature of loneliness and its relationship to how disconnected people feel in today’s world. The American Society of Psychology came out with a statement suggesting that loneliness is a more pressing problem and affects more people’s health than obesity. We hear about obesity being a health crisis, and yet the psychologist’s association is saying that loneliness is actually a greater factor in people’s long-term health. That’s an incredible statement.

As we think about the nature of loneliness, there’s a trend in our society that we’re becoming a people that are less connected. Some research notes that if you compare 1985 to 1990, when people were asked if they had anybody they could go to with a major problem in their life or if they had a major decision to make, one third more people in 1990 said they didn’t have anyone. The interesting thing about this idea that loneliness is increasing among us is not only that loneliness affects our long term health. *“Loneliness prompts a desire to affiliate, but it also triggers feelings of threat and dread, and as the experience grows more intense the feeling of threat prompts a tendency to be critical of others. Loneliness reflects how we feel about our relationships.”* That’s from John Cacioppo and Walter Patrick, who wrote the book *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection* (2008).

The interesting thing about this insight is that one would think that if we get lonely we would want to spend more time with other people, yet a sense of danger or threat grows and then the lonely person becomes critical of others as well, and this mitigates spending time with others. I wonder if this sense of “threat and dread” plays into our own society’s struggle today with getting along, and how we tend to form groups, how we have struggles and wonder about threats. I wonder how much of the threat and dread so prevalent in our society today is at least partially influenced by this sense of separation, of not being connected to one another, the disconnection.

What’s really interesting to me is that as we begin to think about what it does mean to be connected, Jesus gives us this incredible image of being connected. He gives us this metaphor of the vine and branch, and the nature of being connected. With this image there’s a sense of having a source from which the branch grows, and it’s by being connected to that source that the branch flourishes. As I was thinking about this metaphor, I recognized that it is not the only image in scripture to which we can look. Psalm 1 talks about being planted along a stream, being a tree by the water and having a source of life for the tree. The branch has its source of life in the vine.

One other image has struck me which also has to do with water: that story from Acts and how the Ethiopian eunuch asked to be baptized in the water. First, we have to recognize that this is an incredible story in a lot of ways. One, an Ethiopian eunuch is not somebody a Jewish person should ever be close to, let alone talking to about scripture and then offering to bring the Ethiopian eunuch into the community by baptizing him. Then this idea of baptism—he's making a choice. That's the interesting thing about some of these static images of vine and branch and tree and water is that there's this choice involved of being there and engaging with that source. It's a commitment to stay in relationships just as baptism (or confirmation of baptism) is a choice to let the relationship shape and sustain one's life

If we think about that image of the branch and the vine, it's one of those where the branch and the vine don't go anywhere. There's a lot going on around them, perhaps. The seasons change—wind, rain, snow, the leaves come and go, but it's that core image of being there and staying. In some ways, the baptism is a choice then to enter into that relationship with Christ that is a promise to be together from then on.

But, I think there's a little bit of a difficulty in making a choice that feels like it's going to make a big difference in our lives and rule out other directions. I always think of the Robert Frost poem about the road less travelled. We often recognize that there is more than one path and we have to choose a path. Sometimes it feels like if I choose a path I might end up thinking the other path was better. I might want to switch paths. How easy it is to feel that, and yet baptism for the eunuch was suggesting that here is a path and you're going to take it for the rest of your life. It's entering into a life-defining relationship. Being a branch on a vine is not something you change all the time. Yet, it feels to me that we often have a struggle with commitment today. We can easily worry about what it means to be present to a particular relationship, to be there and to stay with it and to move with it and to allow it to form us and shape us, and to continue in it.

I do think that as we go forward in life, as we choose particular paths, we can't help it. We do weave the fabric of our lives out of these paths and relationships formed. Jesus is inviting us, in this image of the vine and the branch, to live an intertwined life with the grace of God in our lives, to let that intertwined-ness be part of what creates the fabric of our lives and informs our decisions. It feels to me like as we allow Christ to be in our lives, as we allow Christ to be the one who is the source and guide for our lives, that the fabric of our lives begins to be woven in a different way. Maybe we have more intricate patterns. Maybe there's a little more beauty. Maybe the way that the fabric of our lives is interwoven becomes more useful.

My sense is that when he's inviting us to be branches on his vine, he's inviting us to recognize the source of our lives, that way of weaving the fabric of who we are into something that lets us be well-connected. It's not being connected to important people. It's being well-connected to the source of life. I think the way he describes that as he moves from that image of being a branch on a vine to recognizing that the source, the sap that comes from the vine into the branch that makes for life, is love itself. It's the love and grace of God that gives us life and invites us to share that with one another, to

be those who are well-connected together. The way I believe the Greek word for love is defined suggests that love is choosing to care for someone else because you know they are valued. And we know that everyone is a valued child of God. The astounding thing is that God has chosen to love us. God values us. So, we are invited into this relationship, this way of being well-connected with God through Christ so that we might have life.

I do believe that this is a salve for the wound of loneliness in our society. God is offering us a way to be connected to the very source of life, and to one another. So I'm going to invite you to think about:

- Where are my places of connection in my life? How do I feel connected? Where are those connections?
- Do those connections give me life? Are they connections that in some way are connected to God? Or do I have connections in my life that feel like they take away from my life?

Sometimes I think the very busyness of our lives is something that sometimes constricts our lives rather than giving us life. What are the ways we can think about engaging with the gift God has given us—the grace and the love—that will guide us, that will show us the way?

I remind you that there a lot of ways that we can enter into that relationship—through reading scripture, through worship, through song, through prayer, through fellowship, through service, etc. There may be moments in our lives where we may experience that direct and incredible grace of God directly. There are other times in our lives where we experience that love and grace through the very people of God sharing it together. I think it's an invitation for us to live the well-connected life, a life with and through Christ. Amen.