

John 15:1-8 | *Apart or A part?*
Fifth Sunday of Easter – April 28, 2024

“*Are you connected?*” When you hear that question you might think I’m asking about the status of your Internet or telephone service. But, of course, that question can also be used as an inquiry about our interpersonal relationships. We hear a lot about social media these days, and how people can be aware of both significant and relatively insignificant events in the lives of others. But just because we are aware or informed, doesn’t necessarily mean that we are connected. In addition to our friends, both real and virtual, that question might also refer to the members of our family. Are we “connected” with our closest relatives, or do we each live separate lives and rarely make contact? We can be “connected” to a lot of people or things in this world. But today, of course, we’re talking about our connection with Jesus. That’s the image our Lord Himself uses in His well-known words from John 15, “*I am the Vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.*” Put another way, Jesus is telling us that we are either 1) apart from Him, or we are 2) a part of Him; cut off from Him, or connected to Him. Today, let’s discuss those two alternatives.

First, let’s consider the *apart* alternative. That is not a wise choice. But it is the choice our sinful human nature wants us to take. In fact, it’s the only choice our sinful human nature **can** take. Because we share in the rebellion of our first parents, Adam & Eve, all of us want to be like God. We don’t want to be the branch; we want to be the vine. We falsely and rebelliously think we can make it on our own. Granted, there might be occasions when we get in a bind and need some help. So we adopt a “*don’t call me, I’ll call You*” attitude toward God.

That’s simply not true, nor is it spiritually healthy. Scripture tells us that our dependency on Him is vital. Last week was Good Shepherd Sunday. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, we are the sheep. Isaiah tells us that we are often “*like sheep that have gone astray, each one turning to his own way.*” The problem for us, though, is that a wandering sheep ends up being a dead sheep. And what is it like for a branch that is independent of the vine? The results are the same. Separation from the vine causes the branch to wither and die. There are certainly no grapes on it. Jesus says, in fact, that a disconnected branch is picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. That is pretty strong language, leaving no room for misunderstanding. Jesus needs to speak that way because it is so serious when people live apart from Him.

The vine imagery that Jesus uses here can remind us also of the body imagery that the Bible uses. Just as we are connected to Jesus as individuals, we are connected to each other through Him. It should cause us concern when those who claim to be a part of the Body are apart from the Body. At the very least, each of us needs to be praying for them. Moreover, perhaps God will give us the wisdom and courage to speak to some of them with encouraging, reconciling words. It’s a dangerous spiritual condition, because when

we separate ourselves from the Body of Christ, we are also depriving ourselves of the nourishment that comes from being connected to the Vine Himself.

Our sinful tendency is to want to be disconnected from Christ and His people and go at life and salvation on our own. But God's intention for us is far different. That is the Good News. Rather than have us **apart** from Him, He want us to be **a part** of Him. He stays connected to us, despite the fact that we don't deserve that favor. He takes the initiative for our salvation, when we were powerless to even think about it. God did that through His Son.

Christ connects us to our Heavenly Father and makes us a part of His Kingdom through faith, because He was "*cut off from the land of the living*" (Isaiah 53:8). The Savior, our Vine, was a shoot from the stump of Jesse. He came into the world as a humble servant, a human like us in every respect expect sin. Yet His purpose was not to live for Himself, but for us. He came "*not to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom.*" That is what He did on the tree of the cross. There He became like a branch that is picked up, thrown into the fire, and burned. He suffered "disconnection" from God when He said, "*My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me.*" He experienced the pangs of hell, so that we never would have to. He was **apart** from His Father, so that we would have **a part** and a place in the Father's House. And now He lives, so that we live also – eternally.

And that's not all. God feeds our faith through His means of grace, the Word and Sacraments. Today, for example, in the bread and wine, the fruit of the Vine, we receive the body and blood of Jesus, the True Vine. The Word and Sacraments strengthen our connection to Christ and empower us to bear fruit. Galatians 5 reminds us that "*the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.*"

Are you connected? Today you might think of your connection to your parents, siblings, or dear friends. But all of those connections pale in comparison to the closeness we have with our Savior. He has literally made us a part -a member- of Himself. What a comfort and motivation it is to hear Him say, "*I am the Vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.*" May God's Holy Spirit always empower us never to be **apart** from our Savior, but always to be **a part** of Him and His kingdom. AMEN.

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