

THE CONNECTING POWER OF LOVE

(06/10/18)

Scripture Lessons: 1 John 4:7-21
John 15:1-17

“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. (1 John 4:7-8)

This morning, as we emerge from the beautiful Easter season with its theme of rediscovering Jesus, we turn to the gospel reading about the vine and the branches. In this metaphor Jesus reminds us of the importance of connection: our connectedness with God and our connectedness with each other. The epistle reading this morning reminds us that in our relationship with God and in our relationships with each other, love is the most powerful and creative of all connections.

The metaphor of the vine and the branches helps us to picture and to understand our connection with Jesus, with God, and with each other. Jesus tells us that he is the vine and we are the branches. As long as we abide in him and he abides in us, we will bear fruit. Cut off from him, we will not bear fruit; in fact, we will wither and die.

Jesus tells us that we are connected with God through him. As branches, we are not only connected to the vine, we are an integral part of the vine. We are of the same substance as the vine. As branches we are also connected with that God whom the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich describes as the “Ground of all Being.” As Christians, our connection with God is through Jesus.

As branches we are not only connected to the vine, we are also connected to each other. Every branch in the vine is connected with every other branch through the vine. We are all children of God. We are all brothers and sisters in Christ. We are all made of the same basic stuff. We are all unique expressions, incarnations of the vine. If we were more conscious of this deep connection, this deep bond between us, it might dissolve the prejudices that are so hurtful to our brothers and sisters, the prejudices that prevent us from forming genuine community.

This metaphor also helps us to understand our meaning or purpose in life. The branch is not an end unto itself. It is part of something bigger. It is meant to bear fruit. The essential nature of the vine, its desire to bring forth fruit, is expressed in and through the branch. God’s desire to bring forth fruit is expressed in and through us. It is expressed *in* us as it transforms us

into loving human beings. It is expressed *through* us as it leads us to reach out to others in compassion and love, to help create the kingdom of God on earth.

In his letter, John tells us that love is the *sine qua non* of the Christian experience, the essence of the Christian life. Because God is love, and because God is the ground of our being, human love has its origin in God. John tells us that if we are born of God and know God, we will love like God loves.

John then goes on to tell us that if we love God, we will also love each other. It doesn't make sense to say that we love God but hate our brothers and sisters, because our brothers and sisters, who are also part of the vine, are of the same substance as us and are of the same substance as God. When we are cruel, when we lack compassion, when we hate we are cutting ourselves off from the vine. Love, which is the essence of God, is also our essential nature as human beings.

These two passages of scripture speak to the post-resurrection experiences, the disciples' encounters with the risen Christ. The resurrection is about connection. It is an affirmation that the disciples' connection with Jesus could not be broken by his death. It is an affirmation that our connection with Jesus can never be broken. He will always be the vine and we will always be the branches, whether we know it or not. If we know this and affirm it, we empower Jesus to transform us, to bring forth fruit in our lives, and then, through us, to bring forth the fruit of God's love in the world.

The resurrection is a reminder of the connecting power of love. Love is the greatest of all connectors. The connecting power of love transcends space and time. It makes Jesus present to us, just as he was present to his disciples. It also makes us present to each other, to those whom we love, whether the person whom we love is near or distant, whether he/she is living or has passed away.

I invite you to join me in a little exercise. First, close your eyes. Now think of someone you care about or love who is present here in the sanctuary this morning. Without actually looking at the person, can you picture the person? Can you feel his/her presence? For just a moment, in your mind, in your imagination, experience how that person is present to you, how you are in the presence of that person because of the connecting power of your relationship with that person. (Pause)

Now think of someone you love who is living but who is not present here this morning. Picture that person. Can you feel his/her presence? For just a moment, experience how that person is present to you, how you are in the presence of that person because of the connecting power of your love. (Pause)

Now think of someone you love who has passed away. Picture the person. Can you feel his/her presence? For just a moment, experience how that person is present to you, how you are in the presence of that person because of the connecting power of your love. (Pause)

You may open your eyes.

Love is the ultimate connecting energy of the universe. As Jesus demonstrated through his death and resurrection, the person, the beloved, does not have to be physically present to be with us. He/she doesn't even need to be alive as we commonly understand being alive. Love reaches past what we experience as death. It spans the two worlds. Perhaps it even dissolves the artificial barrier between them.

The human Jesus of Nazareth was crucified. He died. His followers felt separated from him. They even believed they were separated from him, because this is how they understood death. What they didn't understand is that through love, the person, the beloved becomes spiritually and perhaps even physically present. As we just saw in our little exercise, spiritual presence shades over into physical presence.

We not only believe, we *know* that Jesus can be present to us! He can be present to us through his teaching, through worship, through the sacraments and through prayer. Jesus is present as the Holy Spirit who dwells both within and among us.

Why can't this also be true of our loved ones who have died? Whether living or dead, we are in God. Our loved ones, whether living or dead, are also in God. We are connected with our loved ones both in God and through God. We are connected through love because, as John reminds us, God is love.

I have memories of people whom I love, loved ones who are not present here this morning. I have memories of loved ones who have died. When we feel the presence of Jesus, or when we feel the presence of a loved one who has passed away, this presence can be more than a memory.

The disciples had memories of Jesus. They remembered things he said, things he did. After the resurrection, however, they experienced more than memories. They actually experienced presence, a presence that dissolved the distinction between life and death, time and eternity, the realm of the physical and the realm of the spiritual.

Love makes the beloved present in a powerful way. This is what happened to the disciples. Because they loved Jesus, they became aware of his presence after his death. It is important to note that only those who loved him experienced him as a living presence. Only those who loved him could see him, touch him, hear his words, talk with him and actually experience him after what they thought was his physical death.

Jesus left his disciples and us with a promise: “Lo, I will be with you always.” He tells us that he is with us in the same way that the vine is with the branches. We can never be separated from him and we can never be separated from each other. If we love him, we will feel his presence.

I believe that this is also true of those whom we love, whether we experience them as living or as passed away. They can be with us not only in our memories but also in a very real way if we open our hearts to them through the connecting power of love.

In this post-Easter season that includes both Mother’s Day and Father’s Day, let us be with our Lord and also with our loved ones in these moments of worship and in the week to come.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
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