

WE ARE CONNECTED

A Sermon by the Rev. Janet L. Abel
Preached on Sunday, May 3, 2015

The “I Am” Statements of Jesus and God

My sermon title is an obvious inference from the scripture reading (John 15: 1-8) about the vine and branches that we are connected. It’s a great image, isn’t it? Of a vine or a tree. “We Are Connected.”

The “I am” statements of Jesus appear severally in John. This is one of them, in which he says, “I am” something. “I am the gate.” “I am the living bread.” “I am the shepherd,” the good shepherd. And here, “I am the vine, you are the branches.”

That’s a connection to the story way back in Exodus when Moses asked God’s name, and God gives an interesting answer: “I am who I am,” or “I will be who I will be,” or “I was who I was.” There’s no tense in Hebrew, but that’s the answer, “I am.” So these statements of Jesus are significant for him and for us. “I am” is also a statement of God. “I am the vine.”

Therefore, we are all connected. Since we preach this a lot around here, my question to you is: “Do we believe it?” And maybe the more important question is: “Do we feel it?” Do we really feel it?

On Wednesdays at noon, we have a Spiritual Book Group in which we sometimes read passages from the Bible, but we mainly read many related books and have a good time discussing them. Attendance is increasing,

and some of us bring our lunches. Lately we’ve been reading *The Seat of the Soul*, by Gary Zukav, a physicist who was the first subject when Art started his sermon series on current leaders and thinkers in the spiritual world.

When he preached about Zukav, I really didn’t know who he is. Apparently he’s been a repeating guest on “Oprah” and has written about physics for the masses in his first book, *The Dancing Wu Li Masters*, a winner of the American Book Award in Science. The book we are currently reading is about the evolution of our souls. Over and over he makes the statement that we are all connected.

“We Are Never Alone”

In the most recent chapter, Zukav wrote, “We are never alone,” and I wonder if we believe that. Do we feel it? Can we agree with that? Sometimes we can feel quite alone within ourselves, as we discussed, and we also talked about the fact that sometimes we feel lonely even when we find ourselves among many people. Those two things can be quite different from each other yet can tend to reinforce each other’s negative effects.

I mentioned that classic image of being surrounded by crowds and yet feeling very alone. That’s lonely, but it’s not alone. In fact you’re with lots of people all the time.

No matter where you go, there are people around you, but you can be alone in a crowd.

We also discussed the possibility that some people might choose to be alone, choose isolation at times. That too could be a self-induced action.

We're Bombarded with News . . .

. . . All the time. We're more connected than ever via the internet. Therefore, what happened in Nepal happened to us in a real way. And what's happening in Baltimore is happening to us as well. Frankly, the constant stream of news can sometimes feel like just too much. And the overwhelming stream of tragedies. We ask ourselves, "What can we do?"

Allow me to mention here that many churches have ways to help deal with large-scale human catastrophes. Writing individual checks may not solve all the problems, but there are funds within the UCC that can be used to consolidate money and send it directly to places like Nepal. You can go on the UCC website and find such funds that will help you make a contribution to places that are in desperate need.

Sometimes there's a need to disconnect. But can you ever truly disconnect from God? If God's the vine and we're the branches? Or the tree trunk, and we're the branches on the tree? Should we cut ourselves off and find only emptiness, death, nothingness? We have to be connected for our very lives and the life that is to come. We can never truly disconnect from God, do you think? From

divinity? We live in the midst of divinity, whether we feel that way or not.

Jesus uses the word "abide" in John 15. It's a great word, a full word, a big word, and it's one of my favorites. Also, we're going to sing the hymn "Abide with Me" at the end of my sermon.

"Abide with Me . . .

. . . Fast falls the eventide; the darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide!"

"Abide" means more than just "stay." It means making a home with someone, staying and putting down roots. It's a natural image again, like a tree or a vine. You stay with someone, and you grow together. Abide with me. I abide with the Father, and the Father abides in me. And since we abide in Jesus, we abide together and become one.

A tree or a vine is an organic image, natural and equal, made of the same stuff. And the image brings to mind that there are many, many branches, whether tree or vine. All kinds of people, some of whom, to be totally honest, you might think should be on a different tree. Maybe a different vine. Maybe a different vinyard.

So I started to make a list. Who is it that bugs you the most? Someone asked, "What about people who bug us? You know, are we one with them? Do we have to be?"

So Who's on the Bug List?

Perhaps Bible-thumping evangelists. Are they on a different tree? They surely are branches. The Muslim extremists. Fred Phelps, that awful nut who hated gays and

stood and protested at military funerals. I don't know why they chose military funerals to protest being gay. Do you recall that? He's a branch on the same tree. The people who went to the Supreme Court to protest gay marriage. They too are branches.

The guy in the supermarket express line who has twenty items. You know; you counted. Have you ever done that? I try not to count the items of an express-line patron; I pretend I'm not doing that. But at Wegman's the other day, I'm standing there with my newspaper, and I go to the express line on purpose and look at a lady and think, "That's a lot of stuff she has." So I start to count. Then I get to a six-pack. Now is that six or is it one?

The bug list can get kind of picky. It's the people who bug us a lot. The people we can't stand. The people who kind of annoy us. They are all branches on the tree.

But the image goes on, doesn't it? Some branches have good, tasty fruit on them. On others the fruit's not so good or nonexistent. What does the fruit stand for? There are various ideas about this. In another place scripture says the fruits of the spirit are love and kindness, grace, patience. That's a fruit I'm working on. To be honest with you, I think my patient fruit isn't always that ripe. Sometimes it just falls off. It's what we do, the things we say. It's how we treat people. This is all fruit, and you need fruit. That's why we have branches in the first place.

To Prune or not to Prune: The Question

This is where it might get a little sticky, okay? Now I'm not an expert on pruning,

but here goes my idea about this image. We know why we prune something. I never do, and this is why my plants die, I'm pretty sure. They don't bear fruit, or they don't get great flowers.

But you cut them back, right? And when you cut back a plant or a vine, what are you doing? You're releasing some of the energy back into the main branch so it can reflower more strongly the next season. Pruning redirects the energy, doesn't it? Maybe all the way back to the trunk and back out again so the live stems will flourish. If you don't prune prudently, what happens? Overgrowth or dead twigs and branches that don't bear anything.

This is exactly what happened to my orchid, and I knew it was going to happen. I don't know how to prune an orchid. I don't know how to grow an orchid in the first place, but the idea of being pruned by God might be interesting. God with a sharp knife. God deliberately lopping off things in our lives. Loss. Change. Losing stuff.

I like stuff, but life itself can lead us into pruning, can't it? We do lose things all the time. Stuff. People. Activities. Physical capabilities. Paths that life takes. And we may choose to prune at times. We know that's the path we have to take. We give God a hand in cutting something out that we know to be unhealthy. That we know is not going to lead to more life.

A Zen Aesthetic for Cleaning up

There's another book I'm reading that's making a deep impression on me. I've mentioned it to several of you, and I've lent

it to some of you. It's called *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying up*. Author Marie Kondo is a Japanese woman who has made a living doing this. She helps people tidy up. It sounds so nice, and she looks so nice and neat.

She's got that Zen aesthetic in which you seem to have nothing in your house. I don't know how you achieve that. Smooth surfaces, not a book, maybe just a plant and a little vase, and that's it in your entire living room. It's rather good-looking, truth to tell.

But there's more going on here. Essentially Kondo helps people get rid of stuff that they don't really love. That's what the power in this book is. She suggests you go category-by-category. You go through your home and you pick something – books for me, CD's, movies, clothes (a biggie), shoes, bags, you name it – everything you have, and you go through every item.

You put it all on your floor, pick up each item, and say, "Do you give me joy or not?" If it answers, "No," you say, "Thank you" and put in the give-away or sell pile. Do it! Then all the things you choose to keep are those you love and that give you joy. And when you're finished, you have all this extraspace. The goal is not to fill it back up again.

Kondo finds that people stay neat and clean after they go through this process because it's her "life-changing magic art." Why is it life-changing? How could tidying up do that? The answer is the power in the pruning.

Getting Rid of It Releases Energy

Because I'm doing this myself, I'm not following this book word-for-word, but I'm doing it room-by-room, as opposed to category-by-category. I did a closet just yesterday. Five bags went to the Salvation Army. Honest. One closetful. It's incredible, what we collect. But as I get rid of stuff, I also feel lighter, as though I have more energy to do other things. Maybe more important things.

I think that's how pruning works too. By freeing up those dead branches, I'm allowing the energy to flow better. That energy that's coming from the roots of the tree or the vine, or the soul or my center or a divinity or a God. There's not all this stuff in the way, and more energy can flow freely and perhaps produce new and better fruit in my life.

"I am the vine, you are the branches." So let's be branches, waving in this glorious sunshine, bearing fruit for one another.

Amen.