

“Connected to Christ”

Dear Friends, greetings this morning in the name of our Lord Jesus.

Today we're taking on what is, without question, one of the simplest analogies (we find) in the entire Bible. It's one of the easiest comparisons (Jesus makes) for us to follow. It's also one of the most important and most powerful statements he gives us (about himself), and about the connection we need (in our lives) to have with him.

It's one of seven of what we often (refer to as) the “I Am” sayings of Jesus. In his story about Jesus' life, the gospel-writer, John, records (for us) seven times in which Jesus makes statements, (about who he is), using the phrase “I Am.”

To get us going, just for fun, see if you can remember them. We're only dealing with (one of them) today. See if you can remember all seven. I'll give them to you in the order (in John's gospel) in which they're found, and the context in which (we find them) gives a clue.

Jesus says, (after feeding the five thousand), “I am the bread of life.” In relation to the Pharisees who were living in (spiritual darkness), Jesus says, “I am the light of the world.” In caring for the sheep (in God's flock), Jesus says two things, (one), “I am the door of the sheep,” and (two), he says, “I am the good Shepherd.” To Mary and Martha, when their brother Lazarus died, (Jesus says), “I am the resurrection and the life.” In comforting his disciples and telling them he was soon to go back to his Father to “prepare a place for them”, (he says), “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” And, number seven, in relation to the connection we need to have with him, (in our text today) he says, “I am the true Vine.”

Last week, Pastor Jonna preached on Jesus as the Good Shepherd.” Today we take on his claim about himself as the vine. (You remember the story.) Jesus says, “I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener.” He says, “He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.” (And then he says), “I am the Vine and you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; for apart from me,” Jesus says, “you can do nothing.”

Now, there are a number of lessons in our story today, and I want us to get to (more than just) this one. But, let's start with this one, with the statement Jesus made about what we can do without him.

That's quite the statement (he makes) - the vine, the branches, his Father as the gardener – it's a great analogy. It says worlds about how the Christian life actually works. (We need to stay connected to Jesus, if it's going to happen.) But, to say that we can do nothing without him; to think that we accomplish and produce (not a thing), without a connection in our lives to Christ?

That's quite the claim...but it's not one inconsistent with what we teach and believe. Just think, for a moment, about the confession we make in our creeds, it's basic, (those statements of faith) when we confess what we believe about God. In the Apostles' Creed, when we say (what we do) about who God is and what God does, it's clear that without Christ in our lives, it's a necessity for our life, it's not going to work.

Go through the three articles and you'll see it. Theologically, (in our confession), it's the first article dealing with creation, the second article dealing with redemption, and the third article with (what we talk about as) our sanctification, becoming more and more like Jesus. In all three, it's the work of God, in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that makes it happen. It all depends on him.

Go through what we confess. The Father is the Creator. We are totally dependent upon God (the Father) for our existence. The universe itself, the world in which we live, every breath we take comes as a gift and is

possible (every day) only by his grace. We are totally dependent upon the Father. This was his idea, and not ours. It was God's action, independent of us, without our thought and (most certainly) without our help. The Father is the Creator.

The second article, the Son is the Redeemer. He came to this earth as one of us. He didn't ask us (to vote) before he did it. He just did it, without our even knowing it. Again, this was God's doing. Jesus lived and died so that we might have a life, which our sin made (totally impossible), made possible in his death on the cross and resurrection from the dead. The Bible says, we were helpless and hopeless (and we still are) to save ourselves. What Jesus gives (and offers) to us is only ours by faith. The Son is the Redeemer.

In the same way, in the third article, the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit is the sanctifier. He is the one who works to create faith in us. He is the one who enables us to live (and to look) like Christ. The Bible says, we have no power (in ourselves) to believe or to (even live) as God wants, apart from what he makes possible (for us) through his Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the one (working in our lives) who makes it all work.

Now, put all that together, and what do you have? You have the very thing Jesus said to us in this last of his "I am" sayings. He said, "I am the vine and you are the branches...remain in me and I in you, and you will bear fruit...cut yourself off from me"...and good luck (he says) even doing anything.

When we think about God as being three-in-one, we cannot think about the work of (each one) without thinking about the other two. The Father is the Creator, but the Scriptures tell us that "in Jesus, all things were created...and without him not anything that was made was made." In the same way, the Spirit is the one who leads us to faith, but it's Christ who is "with us and in us and (alongside of us)" in and through the Spirit.

In other words, Jesus is actively involved in the work of all three. Jesus is intimately involved in every aspect of our lives. As a result, his words are more true than we might think. "Apart from me (he says), you can do nothing."

Now, at first hearing, it might seem as if those words are not very hope-filled at all. "Apart from Jesus, you can do nothing." That doesn't sound like a very optimistic statement. Apart from him, we have no hope. But turn it around, as a word of promise, and it's exactly the opposite.

"Apart from Jesus, we can do nothing." It's true. (We can't and we won't.) At least not anything that lasts. But "in Jesus" and "connected to Jesus" and through the power and the promise of Jesus...the apostle Paul says, "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength." (I can do all things.) There's nothing I can't do, when I remain connected to Jesus. There's nothing beyond my hope (and my reach) when I'm connected to Christ.

Now, we all know about the importance of being connected. We live in a "connections matter" kind of world. The connections (we have) are becoming increasingly more important and (essential) every day. Go on the internet and you can connect with people all over the world. Things like "Facebook" and "Linked In" and "Twitter", "Snap-chat" and Instagram," it's all over, everywhere you turn.

Now, the reality is, you can live with any (one of those) in your life, and many people (have all of them), and be just fine. You can also live without any (one of those) in your life, and many people (have none of them), and they're just fine. But you cannot and will not and you will never "live" and (be just fine) outside of Christ.

Our connection with Jesus makes all the difference in the world. Staying intimately attached to Christ is the starting point of our existence. It's where it all starts. And it's not only the starting point (of our existence), but it's also the sustaining part of the Christian life.

I don't know if you noticed it. Eight times in just a few short verses, Jesus talks about how we're to "remain" in him. (Remember what he says?) He says, "Remain in me, and I will remain in you." He says, "No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit," Jesus says, "unless you remain in me."

Now, we'll talk about bearing fruit in a minute. (It's an important part.) But here, Jesus says we need to remain in him. And, you know as well as I do, that the challenge of remaining in Jesus is one every one of us has to deal with every day. Because, if your life is anything like mine, if it's anything like (so many people's) in this life, it's so easy to get caught up in doing so many important and worthwhile things that we forget about the One with whom we need the connection the most.

Days go by, and we haven't even thought about reading our Bibles. Weeks come and go, and our prayer life ends up being put on hold. One week we end up missing church. The next week, something else comes up, and we end up missing again. Before we know it, it's no longer a regular pattern and part of our life.

Now, don't get the wrong idea, because praying and reading your Bible and coming to church don't save you from your sins, get you into the kingdom. (They don't.) Jesus saves you from your sins. Jesus gets you into heaven. It's our connection with Christ that makes the difference. It's the ongoing relationship we have with him that keeps us on track and alive in our daily walk.

Don't get the wrong idea. It's not those disciplines of the Christian life that save us from anything. Jesus saves us. And he saves us from everything. (He does, and they don't...and they never will.) But they do serve a purpose. And the purpose they serve is to connect us to Christ.

A number of years ago, in the New Year's Day Tournament of Roses Parade, (I might have shared this), the Standard Oil Company, (known today) as Chevron, had a beautiful float. (It was almost comical when it happened.) In the middle of the parade, this major oil company's float came to a grinding halt. What happened? It ran out of gas. In the midst of taking care of (all of the other details), they forgot to fill the tank. And so the rest of the parade had to wait while someone ran off to get another gallon!

Now, maybe this is a stretch, but I think, too often, the same thing happens in the Christian life. Too many well-intentioned followers of Jesus, people who want as much as anything to be faithful in living the Christian life, end up busying themselves with so many things that they forget to fill their spiritual tank. And so, in spite of the fact that they're always busy with something, they're, nonetheless, failing to produce anything.

You see, it's possible in this world, Jesus says, to have a full life, without producing any fruit. We need to fill the tank. We need to keep the connection alive. We need to stay in touch with Jesus, keep on returning to the One who is our Source. If not, he says, we can keep on running, stay as busy as the next, but our running and our staying busy are finally going to leave us short.

It's a simple principle of life. It's also a profound lesson we need to learn. Try holding your breath and continue to function. (It doesn't happen.) Unplug a toaster. You'll never end up with toast. Unplug a Christian. You'll never come out on the other end with anything that counts.

The psalmist says, "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain." It's the same thing in our story. You can stay as busy as the next, doing all kinds of wonderful things. But if they're not being done in Christ, if they're not growing out of your relationship with Jesus, then they're not bearing any lasting fruit.

Before closing (today), let me fill you in on (a bit of) what my week (was like) this past week. In many ways, it was a week like many other weeks. Preps for teaching, time spent with staff, a few meetings, visitations, getting ready for the things coming up. In many ways, it was much (the same) as any other week.

But (in many ways), it was also a week unlike most others. Last week, from the eight years Mary and I spent in Elk Grove, (before coming to San Jose), we lost a dear and a very close friend. We had just gone to see him on the Saturday before, two weeks ago. On Sunday, (the very next day), he took a turn for the worse. On Monday, that fast, he was gone. 69 years old, a close friend, it's getting younger all the time. On Friday, (two days ago), we drove up to Elk Grove and I preached at my dear friend's memorial. One the easiest and one of the hardest sermons I've ever preached.

Yesterday, we had a memorial service, (here at St. Timothy's), for one of our faithful and faith-filled members, Noel Soos. Nearly 83 years of life. Not long, either, by any means, but certainly not short. Yesterday morning, we said goodbye to Noel.

Yesterday afternoon, I conducted a wedding celebration for Justin Brewer. (I don't know if you remember the Brewers?) The Brewer' family has (for the most part) moved away from San Jose, where they lived for many years, and are now living in Oregon. Justin is still here, now with this new wife and their daughter. I was privileged to share in their wedding.

And now here, this morning, we're gathered together, (as we do) every week, around God's Word, hearing God's promises, and being renewed in our faith.

Now, why do I share those details (of my week) with you? In many ways, it was just another week. In other ways, it was a week unlike most others. The reason I share those things is for no other reason, no other reason, than to fill you on the one thing (all of those gatherings) had in common.

In that sermon for my good friend, Kenny, (on Friday), in the memorial service (yesterday morning) for our brother (in Christ), Noel, for the wedding celebration of Justin and Ashley Brewer (yesterday afternoon), the one thing I shared in those services, that was similar (but different) in each of those settings, (and, again, here this morning), was the essential and the saving connection we need and we have in Christ.

In Christ, we live. Apart from Christ, we die. (That's the bottom line.) It's that simple. And the setting and the detail and the circumstances (around whatever's happening) in our lives, doesn't matter. As a student, as a parent, as a husband or wife, single or married, working or retired, widowed or a widower...you name it, and it fits.

It's the connection we have with Jesus, day in and day out, from the time we're born, until that day when we're called home to be with our Lord...the goal of our life, the purpose of our life, the reason we're here as we are, (by the grace of God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) - is to bear fruit for Jesus...one day at a time, one faithful word or action at a time, one branch at a time (that's what we are), connected to the One who is the Vine. Amen.