

**“I Am the Vine”**  
**Isaiah 5:1-7; John 15:1-11**  
**Fourth Sunday in Lent**  
**March 2, 2008**

*God said, “It’s not good for the Man to be alone.” Genesis 2:18, The Message*

Along with some guy from Blair named Denny Silk, I just completed a five-week study of H. Richard Niebuhr’s classic book “Christ and Culture.” Every Tuesday Denny and I would meet downtown at the State Office Building and have class with ten other Nebraska United Methodist pastors. But not all of those pastors were sitting with us in the classroom. Some were down in Lincoln, others were over in North Platte, and the rest were way out in Scottsbluff. We were meeting in various videoconference rooms across the state, you see. Although separated by many miles, every Tuesday at noon we would come together for very same class taught by the very same teacher. While videoconferencing is by no means new, the technology is still really quite amazing to me. Electronically speaking, we are better connected than ever before. Cell Phones, text messaging, the Internet, e-mail—we can be anywhere and talk to anyone in the world instantly. And yet, in spite of all of our amazing “connections,” it seems that humans are as disconnected as ever.

There is a story making the rounds about an elderly woman named Mamie Adams. Perhaps you have heard it. Mamie lived in a small town and always went to the local post office to buy stamps because the folks behind the window were always so friendly. Now I know some of you who have lived your entire life in a big city may not believe that a story like that could possibly be true, but I’ve lived enough places to know that there are good people everywhere—even at the post office. Anyway, shortly before Christmas she went to buy stamps. As you can imagine, the lines were quite long. Another, younger customer pointed out that there was no need for her to wait in line as the post office had recently been updated and there was now a stamp machine located in the lobby. Mamie’s response to the young woman was a classic, “I know, dear, but the machine won’t ask me about my arthritis.”

Has this world ever caused you to feel cut off, alone, or isolated? Have you, like Mamie Adams, ever felt the need to be connected? I think that one of the reasons her story appeals to so many of us is because we know how much we need to have that feeling of connectedness. Back in 1982, futurist John Naisbitt wrote a bestseller called Megatrends, a book in which he described the trends he sensed were beginning to develop as society moved into the new century. One of those arising trends was the need for high touch in an ever-increasing high tech world. While not a theologian by any stretch of the imagination, Naisbitt wrote that humans were created with an innate need for meaningful connections. In viewing the situation back then, he wrote that we must learn to balance the material wonders of technology with the spiritual demands of our human nature. In doing so he unintentionally echoed one of the concerns of scripture, one which tells us that one of those spiritual demands is the need for humans to be in meaningful relationships. You may remember that way back in the beginning God said that it was not good for either men or women to be alone. The 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Genesis says that we have been created in such a way that our deepest purpose in life can only be discovered within the context of meaningful relationships. Bill Power, my Old Testament professor, put it this way:

*“This initial story...portrays how things ought to be. It’s a story about peace, not in the sense of absence of strife, but in the sense of relationships intact. Here is a portrait of an idyllic state: humans in harmony with one another through mutual respect; humans in harmony with God because they know they are under divine command; and humans in harmony with the natural world around them because they know they have a responsibility to care for it and to love it.”<sup>1</sup>*

Yet as you know, that idyllic state did not last. And despite of all the things that our civilization has fashioned that supposedly can facilitate the rebuilding of those relationships, despite all of the things that have come down the pike that are supposed to be able to bring us closer together, we remain people who are profoundly disconnected. Naisbitt’s advice, just like that of scripture, has been neglected. More and more, the

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<sup>1</sup> W. J.A. Power, The Book of Genesis, A Folk Theology, Perkins Journal, Winter 1984, p. 8

communal understanding of our lives has been replaced by individual ideas of autonomy and isolation. More and more real relationships are being replaced by virtual relationships. The technology that held the promise of bringing us together has continued to cause us to drive us farther and farther apart. But as you heard earlier, our “disconnectedness” is not something that began with the invention of the microprocessor! As Genesis reminds us, its origin goes much further back than that. And that is probably why, on the very night that he was betrayed, Jesus turned to his disciples and reminded them of one of faith’s basic lessons, ‘I am the vine, you are the branches.’ We need to look into those words and see what he meant.

But before we do, let me remind you that we have been exploring some of the “I am” sayings of Jesus during the season of Lent. Found only in John’s Gospel, Jesus took common, everyday images and used them to not only give us a fuller understanding of him, but a fuller understanding of us as well. These familiar sayings help us to know what it takes to live that fully satisfying, abundant life for which every single one of us longs. And by looking at the “I am” sayings during the Lenten season, by remembering that Jesus said, “I am the bread of life...I am the light of the world...I am the good shepherd... I am the way, the truth, and the life,” I believe we can prepare ourselves for an Easter unlike any we have ever known before. Today’s saying comes from the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of John. It is part of what has come to be known as “The Supper Discourse.” After washing his disciple’s feet, offering them an example of the kind of love he hoped they would share with each other, Jesus spent the rest of his time speaking to those sitting around the table. He spoke as metaphorically and mysteriously as ever. But this time the disciples noticed that there was a difference. This time he spoke with a passion and urgency they had not heard before. And even though they did not fully comprehend when he looked at them and said, “I am the vine, you are the branches,” that passion led them to know that they had better pay attention. And it would probably do us well if we did the same.

“I am the vine, you are the branches.” When speaking those words to his disciples, Jesus used an image that would have been very familiar to everyone around

that table. Vine dressing, or the growing of grapes, was a major industry in Jesus' day. I have no way of proving it, but as significant as grape growing was to the economy of the area back then, I have to imagine that most of those sitting around the table had worked out in the vineyards at least once in their lifetime. I'll bet you anything that just as young Midwesterners used to detassel corn during the summer, young Mideasterners used to pick grapes. And because so many of them did, the disciples probably understood a thing or two about vines. They understood, for instance, that it was the vine that brought the water and nutrients to the branches that were so vital for producing grapes. They understood that every once in awhile the vinedresser would prune certain branches so that other branches could produce even more fruit. And they also understood that if a branch was ever severed from the vine, if a branch somehow was no longer connected to its source of life, then it would quickly die. So when Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches," I'm guessing that the disciples would not necessarily have been left scratching their heads. I don't think the disciples would have had too much trouble figuring out this particular saying. And when you add into the equation the fact that the vineyard, that place where grapes are grown, had been used by priests and prophets alike for centuries as a symbol for the people of Israel and their relationship with God, well, I have a feeling that this just might have been the easiest of the "I am" statements for them to understand. They knew that people needed to be connected.

But what did they do with that knowledge? More importantly, what do you do with it? "I am the vine, you are the branches." As I said, I imagine that those sitting around that table would have had little trouble understanding what Jesus meant with those words. I would imagine that none of us have any trouble understanding them either. It is simple lesson, a truth we see in nature everyday. The hard part, it seems comes in the next sentence. While we may have no problem with the "I am the vine, you are the branches" part of the equation, Jesus' follow up line is one that does us in almost every time: "Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." The word "abide" is an old fashioned word. Although the meaning of the word is still around, we don't use it much anymore. Those Holiday Inn Express signs you see along the road, for example, may not invite you to "Abide with us," but they still

beckon you to “Stay here.” I didn’t ask Carol to “abide with me” back in February of ’05. But I did as her to marry me, to share my life, to stand with me so that together we might face the world. That is the sense of that old fashioned word. “Abiding” has to do with persevering, continuing, lasting, staying with it over the long haul. It not only means being connected, but staying connected—just like a branch is to a vine. Jesus was telling those around that table back then, and is telling those of us in this room right now, that, “If you really want that vital connection, if you truly hunger for a meaningful sense of purpose in life, if you really want to grow and produce fruit in the way you were created to produce, then stay put!”

There was a chapter of Alcoholic Anonymous that met in my last church. Every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday night they would meet in the Fellowship Hall, offering each other support. It was an amazing group of people. Truck drivers, businessmen, and housewives—even the high school principle were among those who would gather for the meetings. Some had been a part of the group for years. Others had just started. But they all had one thing in common: every single day they battled the urge to drink. And as long as they stayed together, as long as they drew strength from one another, as long as they stayed connected, they were able to find what they needed to beat those urges. Of course, every once in awhile one of the members of the group would think that they no longer needed the support that the group offered. Every so once in awhile there was someone who thought that he or she could make it alone, that he or she were strong enough to battle his or her demons privately. Well, you don’t have to be a genius to know what a disaster that decision turned out to be. As they learned, the only way they could make it was to abide with one another. The lives of those members depended upon the connection that they had with the group. Once that connection was lost, everything fell apart. And so it is with our relationship to Christ.

*I am the Vine, you are the branches. When you’re joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant. Separated, you can’t produce a thing.*

Jesus' teaching was really quite simple. If we stay connected to him we will live productive and meaningful lives. But if we try to find our real sense of purpose in anything else but him, if we try to make ourselves the measure of our lives, if we ever become disconnected, then we dry up and die. These familiar words remind us that we are called to stay connected to the vine. We are called to abide in Christ. The meal that you see set before you has been given to help you and me stay connected. When we share the bread and the cup we are reminded of that which binds us to Christ. As we come forward this morning I invite you to remember that bond, that essential connection, and live!