

“Remain”

John 15:1-9

This may be a stretch for some of us, but do you remember your high school graduation? The excitement you felt and the terror of being on the threshold of the rest of your life? Perhaps you were chomping at the bit to move out on your own? Deep down inside knowing that you were at a point of no-return, that no matter how often you might come back home for a visit, this was a time of stepping out on your own? Maybe the exhilaration of autonomy that you never experienced before and, at the same time, the anxiety of vulnerability from exposure to the dangers of the world like never before?

High School graduation is an awesome time, both for graduating seniors and their parents. I’ll never forget when our oldest son finished high school and moved into Assumption dorm on the campus of Duquesne University. He couldn’t wait to pack up the Subaru wagon and get on with his life—as I remember, the same Subaru wagon he rolled onto its roof on Route 28 north. Our little boy was venturing out into the world to make his mark.

It’s no secret that often when kids strike out on their own, they quit going to church. They cut themselves off from their extended family of faith. And that’s unfortunate, because, lacking the support of a faith community, they become even more vulnerable to the temptations of the world. And so, to any students who are graduating from high school this year, I’d like to offer this simple word: **STAY CONNECTED!** Whether you leave home to go to college, to get married, to enter the work force, to join a branch of the armed forces, whatever you do, stay connected to the Body of Christ, the church.

It’s a word we all need to hear: Whether you change jobs, move to a new location, retire, experience the death of a loved one, enter a new chapter of your life—stay connected. Don’t go it alone. Draw from the strength of others. Feel the stability of a community of faith. Let God’s Spirit flow through your veins and keep you strong and healthy through the many transitions of life.

This is sort of the message Jesus gave his disciples before he traversed the way of the cross. He said, *“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me*

and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). I’d like us to look more closely at this passage to see how it speaks to us today, and then I’d like to suggest four simple ways to stay connected to the Body of Christ throughout the changing seasons of our lives. The Scripture reading begins, *“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener”* (15:1).

On the surface, Jesus’ words sound metaphorical and poetic, but nothing more. What we need to remember is that, in the Old Testament, the “vine” was a very common image for the people of Israel. In the Old Testament Isaiah’s song of the vineyard says, *“The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in”* (Isaiah 5:7). In the Book of Jeremiah, the Lord says, *“I had planted you like a choice vine of sound and reliable stock. How then did you turn against me into a corrupt, wild vine?”* (Jeremiah 2:21). Hosea writes, *“Israel was a spreading vine; he brought forth fruit for himself”* (Hosea 10:1). And in the words of Psalm 80, *“You transplanted a vine from Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it, and it took root and filled the land.”*

All this to say that when Jesus said, *“I am the true vine,”* his listeners would have known exactly what he was talking about. They would’ve been quick to make the connection. Jesus was the new Israel, the one through whom God was establishing a new covenant. No longer would the makeup of God’s chosen people be determined by their race or their Jewish ancestry, it would hinge upon their relationship to Jesus Christ, *the true vine*.

I once saw an online post that said, “Going to a church doesn’t make you a Christian any more than going to McDonald’s makes you a hamburger!” Please understand that I think going to church is important and I heartily recommend it, but I’d be the first to say, going to church is fundamentally important only in so far as it leads you to a greater knowledge of God’s love and a closer relationship to the Lord Jesus, the true vine. To put it bluntly, just having your name on the roll isn’t enough. The joy of salvation comes from knowing God’s presence, trusting that our sins are forgiven, and having the assurance that in every situation and circumstance, God is with us. We are never alone.

The Jews in Jesus' day had the ancestry, but they lacked the Holy Spirit. In much the same way, the church today bears the name of Jesus Christ; the question is, how well do we know him as Lord and Savior? Do we listen to his teachings? Do we follow his example? Do we walk in fellowship with him? He is the true vine, the source of our covenant relationship with God. He is the link by which we are able to stay connected to God and to each other. In the words of the old gospel hymn, he is the "tie that binds our hearts in Christian love."

Jesus said, "*I am the true vine*" going on to say, "*and my Father is the gardener*" (15:1). Obviously, the work of the gardener is to prune the branches. I'm no horticultural expert, but from what I've been taught, pruning the branches makes the plant or tree healthier and more productive. Dead branches get in the way, and too many branches sap the strength of a plant or tree. By pruning, the gardener helps the healthy branches grow stronger and bear fruit. I don't really enjoy pruning trees, although I've done it. I am able to prune trees, but I don't like to, because I know that once I whack off a limb that's growing, it won't be green for long and will wither and die. Do you suppose God grieves as he prunes us to be stronger fruit bearing disciples of Jesus?

We should be careful because we don't want to suggest that God intentionally hurts us or causes us pain. Scripture says, "*For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone*" (Lamentations 3:33). At the same time, God does allow us to suffer. Just ask the people whose homes were recently destroyed by tornadoes or floods this spring. As Christians, we're far from immune to tragedy and loss. So, where does God fit into all this? Personally, I like to think that God is sympathetic and understanding; that God is *with us* in our suffering. I like to believe that, beyond the pain of the moment, there's a bigger picture we can't always see, but we can trust him because, "*we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose*" (Romans 8:28). "*In all things!*" Romans 8 says—the painful as well as the pleasant, because pruning makes the plant healthier and stronger.

The gardener prunes the branches to make them strong and productive. God uses the hardships of our lives to strengthen our faith and make us fit disciples

for the building of his kingdom on earth. Annie Johnson Flint puts it this way: “It is the branch that bears the fruit that feels the knife to prune it for a larger growth, a fuller life...it is the hand of Love Divine that holds the knife, that cuts and breaks with tenderest touch, that you, whose life has borne some fruit, might now bear much (more).”

We pastors think we know about grief and loss, but, until we experience it for ourselves, we really don't know the first thing. God uses the hardships of life to strengthen our faith and make us better disciples of Christ. The key thing Jesus says here is in v. 4: “*Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.*” Once we're cut off from the source of God's Spirit, we begin to wither and die. And so, a word to the wise: STAY CONNECTED. The biggest question is, how? How can we *remain* in Jesus? I can think of four simple basic ways—prayer, study, fellowship, and service.

Prayer is the lifeline of any healthy life of faith. Prayer enables us to be in communion with God. Prayer doesn't have to be long or complex; it can be as simple as a brief morning chat with a friend. All you have to do is spend a few quiet moments focusing on the Presence of God, mentally going over, if not saying out loud, whatever is on your mind and heart, then listening for the still, small voice of God speaking to you. It's that simple, but it can make all the difference in discerning God's will for your life and knowing that God is with you, whatever situation and circumstances you may be facing at the moment.

Start with prayer, then spend a few minutes **studying Scripture**. Now, I'm well aware there are parts of the Bible that are confusing and hard to understand. There are passages in the Bible I'm not sure anyone really understands! But that shouldn't stop us from finding places that are clear and self-evident and speak directly to our life. And so, I encourage you to read the Bible for inspiration and growth. Find a verse or two and hold onto them tightly to give you comfort and strength. I don't know of anyone who can't relate to that.

Start with prayer, *then* read a passage of the Bible, *then* fellowship **in the company of other Christians**. Rubbing shoulders with those who share our faith can give us a lift when we're discouraged. It's like having a jogging partner to prod us on days when we just don't feel like running. Relating to other Christians can also keep us from going off on a tangent and chasing after half-baked teachings and beliefs.

Pray. Study the Scriptures. Spend time in the fellowship of other Christians. **And, finally, do something good for someone less fortunate.** It's one of the best ways to stay connected to the Body of Christ because, as often as not, Christ reveals himself to us in the form of those who are poor. When we reach out to those in need, especially those who can't return the favor, we are reaching out to Christ. Here's the sum of it all: Jesus said, "*I am the vine; you are the branches.*" He is the source of our life; apart from him, dear friends, we will die.

We branches are to *remain* in him by holding fast to the disciplines of **prayer, study, fellowship, and service**. And wonderfully, because Christ *remains in us*, we're assured of a secure connection to the Body of Christ and an everlasting place in the kingdom of God.

Here's the word of the week that cannot be missed in verse 4: "***Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.***"

Whether you're changing jobs, moving to a new location, retiring, experiencing the death of a loved one, entering a new chapter of your life—**stay connected**. Don't go it alone. Draw from the strength of others. Experience the stability of a community of faith. Let God's Spirit flow through your veins and keep you strong and healthy through the various transitions of life. ***Remain in Jesus!***

Blessing and glory and wisdom and power be to our God forever and ever!
Amen.