

“Being Connected”

Acts 8:26-40; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

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The dictionary defines connected as *the state of being joined or linked; being connected gives a feeling of belonging to, or having affinity with a particular person or group: it's about partnering, trust and connectedness.*

Yesterday morning I took a walk through the neighbourhood because there was a community yard sale going on – last year I could help out with it – this year I didn't quite find the time – and I was regretting letting that important connection go ... so I went, ... and I found a couple of treasures, but my real aim was to find Evelyn, the neighbourhood connector who got all of this going. I found her! ... And we reconnected – and then she took me to see her mom who I and my mother had met at last year's sale. We had made a real strong connection last year – Evelyn's mom and my mom are both from Holland and they shared stories of how they came to Canada, and later that afternoon we also shared 'faith' stories – so yesterday Evelyn's mom and I had a great hugging reunion and chatted a bit – she was busy helping out, baking, serving coffee to volunteers and such and I had work to do in my study – so we parted ways.

Being connected in this life is pretty important, even children know that – if you are connected to friends it can be a lot of fun..., and if you have no connections it can be tragic

But we want connections to be good too ... Sometimes we like to use connections to 'get ahead' or feel special, ... we all know that being connected to the right people can affect our job opportunities, or outcomes of success of various kinds....

... the best connections are those that are nurturing....

Having all the right connections or even one of the right connections certainly appears to have its advantages in this life – but a lot of “connections” that give us the advantage in life are related to supply and demand, or the economy, or to the political climate, or to the loyalty of friends... and they could quickly change.

History, even recent history, has taught us that there are no guarantees when it comes to these kinds of connections, because the one who is on top yesterday may find themselves at the bottom today.

This reminded me of a movie I saw years ago (a 1983 American comedy) called *Trading Places*, with Eddie Murphy and Dan Aykroyd – In this movie, two elderly wealthy men flip the circumstances of an upper-class commodities broker and a homeless street hustler – the elderly men arrange through their connections to have the two trade places as an experiment

of the theory of nature versus nurture, that is does nature determine one's choice to enter a life of crime or not, or does nurture (how one was raised) – that is an interesting question, isn't it? And it was all for a \$1 bet. It was quite funny because in the end the good guys come out on top, but it was also a bit disturbing to watch how radically connections influenced who remained friends to the two men experimented on, and the value they were given in this experiment.

Having connections can be very good for people, but they need to be the right connections. Because if people make the wrong connections, they could end up in a place they don't want to be, like organized crime, or ISIS, where you may want to get out but there is no way out except to die. (Now those are extreme examples, but people are actually choosing those connections).

Jesus frequently used concrete examples of things that were familiar to the people he was teaching, to help them visualize what he wanted them to understand. In our Scripture reading today Jesus talks about being connected to the vine.

I came across an interesting example of a vine that gives you a picture of what choosing the wrong connections looks like. Deuteronomy mentions a vine called "the vine of Sodom", and it makes an interesting comparison to the "true vine" Jesus is talking about, with regard to choosing connections.

A Bible dictionary states: "The fruit [of the vine of Sodom] greatly resembles externally a large smooth apple or orange, hanging in clusters of three or four together, and when ripe is of a yellow colour. It is ... fair and delicious to the eye and soft to the touch but, on being pressed or struck, it explodes with a puff; the celebrated apples of Sodom, of which Josephus speaks, "which indeed resemble edible fruit in colour, on being plucked by the hand, is dissolved into smoke and ashes."¹ ...this fruit is toxic.

Making the wrong connections, can lead to 'smoke and ashes'.

The Gospel writer of John 15 tells us Jesus is the right connection, our most important connection: Jesus says, "I am the true vine and you are the branches – Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." Jesus knew being connected was essential to living fully.

This picture of the vine would be full of meaning for the Jews – because the grape vine is very common - The vine was grown all over Palestine... but unlike the vine of Sodom, and this vine would or should produce fruit to eat, to dry, to make wine; but it is a vine which needs a great deal of attention to produce the best fruit.

¹ <http://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/smiths-bible-dictionary/vine-of-sodom.html>

The picture of the vine is used to describe the relationship between God and his people, Israel – the prophets in the Old Testament (Jeremiah 2:21; Isaiah 5:7; Ezekiel 15:6; 19:10, 12) speak of once a splendid vine, but now broken and turned degenerate – and we read it is being restored in the New Testament through the “true vine”, Jesus.

The vine is not a noble tree, like the Olive, the cedar or the oak - vines would often trail along the ground supported by little forked sticks, or sometimes it would twine itself around another tree, or be grown on poles, or be trained to spread on walls and trellises.

Imagine being connected to this ‘true vine’ ... can you picture this in your mind ... the ‘true vine’ - it sends out branches everywhere – along the ground – it attaches itself to things – it spreads far and wide – it produces fruit – it is common – inclusive – the dead branches are cut away, the healthy ones pruned - pruning might sound harsh, but it renews the vine’s vitality to make them more fruitful. Useless vines drain the plant’s strength. (Interestingly, the same word is used for cleansed and pruned).

... the best connections are those that are nurturing....

And the vine can be cut down, but does not die when it is cut down –it grows new branches

Scripture gives us a picture of what it is like to be connected to the ‘true vine’. 1 John 4:17-18 & 20-21 in the Message says it this way: *When we take up permanent residence in a life of love, we live in God and God lives in us. This way, love has the run of the house, becomes at home and mature in us, so that we’re free of worry on Judgment Day—our standing in the world is identical with Christ’s. There is no room in love for fear. Well-formed love banishes fear. The command we have from Christ is blunt: Loving God includes loving people. You’ve got to love both.*

If we are rightly connected to God, we are also well connected to our brothers and sisters.

John 15 tells us we are the branches connected to the vine, we will bear fruit and be pruned so we bear more fruit;

if we abide in Jesus and his words abide in us we can ask for whatever we wish and it will be done for us – because when we abide in Christ, his will will be our will and we will not ask for anything that is not according to his will. The Father will be glorified by this, that we bear much fruit and become disciples, because as the vine dresser the Father gives his whole life to the vines, tending them, feeding them, coaxing them toward fruitfulness - we are the branches – the body of Christ – the Mission of God – then we have the right connections to God and to the people of God - in love!

The great missionary theologian, Lesslie Newbigin describes what a disciple will be like when he has the right connection to the “true vine”

Jesus had no program of his own...He simply responded in loving obedience to the will of his Father as it was presented to him in all the accidents, contingencies and interruptions of daily life...in the Roman Empire....Only thus did Jesus “abide” in the love of His Father. So the disciples will “abide” in the love of the Father by following (Jesus) along exactly the same road.

Disciples will not be concerned to create a career for themselves. They will leave that to the wise husbandry of the Gardiner who alone knows what pruning, what watering and feeding, what sunshine, what rain, what warmth or cold is needed to produce the fruit he desires. The disciple will "learn obedience" by following Jesus in the same kind of moment-by-moment obedience to the will of the Father as it is disclosed in the contingent happenings of daily life in the place and time where God has placed them.

In Acts 8: 26-40 Scripture gives us a picture of the evangelist, Philip, with the right connection to the 'true vine'. Philip's ministry in Jerusalem is very successful, when suddenly an angel of the Lord tells him to go down the road from Jerusalem to Gaza into the wilderness – so he goes – in the middle of success - and the Spirit tells him to go over to the chariot of the Ethiopian Eunuch who is in charge of the queens entire treasury – he is well connected this Ethiopian - but do you notice Philip has no interest is getting connected to his status or wealth. Philip's only interest is that this man understands the Scripture that he is reading, so that he can know and understand the good news about Jesus. At the end of their discussion, the Eunuch asks to be baptized. Philip baptizes him and his work there is done – he keeps travelling, proclaiming the good news. He has the right connection, he has everything he needs, he is bearing fruit and glorifying God – he is so excited that he is connected to the 'true vine'!

Remember how I told you about reconnecting with Evelyn's mom, before I left she whispered to me, "I hope the Spirit gives you what you need to finish your sermon" – now there is the connection I needed most – a blessing! ...and a reminder of faith stories....

Whatever your connections are, hold on tight to the right connection, our most important connection to the 'true vine' –And all those other connections we have, may just be the right connections so we can bear fruit, like Philip, and Evelyn's mom; we are connected in so many ways to one another here in this Body of Christ, As we connect and share faith stories as brothers and sisters in Christ we greatly multiply fruit bearing here, and in the many connections we nurture in our lives – friends, family, neighbours, colleagues, and in larger communities wherever the Spirit leads us.... The best connections are those that nurture.

Jesus said, "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."

All honour and glory be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Focus quote: *Eventually everything connects – people, ideas, objects. The quality of the connections is the key to quality per se. - Charles Eames*

Sources used:

Scripture: NRSV & the Message; William Barclay Daily Study Bible, Gospel of John vol.2; Lesslie Newbigin from *Light has come*; [http://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries](http://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries;);