HOW ARE YOU CONNECTED TO JESUS?

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. 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. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will 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.

I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. Anyone who does not remain in me is thrown away, and such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, you will ask what you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

The question comes up on various occasions. What’s your connection to this year’s senior class? How are you connected to the bride and groom, to the deceased? We ourselves have wondered and probably asked that question a time or two. We assume that if people are at those events, there’s a connection of some kind – by blood, through friendship, through work – because connections bring people together.

Today we have come together in the house of God. This particular house even has a name on it that Jesus, the Son of God, called himself: Good Shepherd. So here comes the question: How are you connected to Jesus?

1. Through the Word Jesus speaks

How am I connected to Jesus Christ? Well, through my parents, who were Christian, and through churches I’ve been a member of, because they are Christian churches, and I put in some pew time there. I’m connected to Jesus because I’ve learned and studied things that Jesus did, and memorized many things that Jesus said. And I guess I would also say that I’m sort of connected to Jesus through putting money in the offering plate and sometimes lending a hand to what is and to what goes on here at church in Jesus’ name.

Through church – belonging to a church, going to church and supporting church work – many people think that’s how they are connected to Jesus. Many Jews of Jesus’ day thought the same thing about God. They thought they were connected to God through their parents, all the way back to Abraham, and through sitting at synagogue and sacrificing at temple.

Prophets of God before Jesus told the Jews that if that’s how they viewed their sacrifices, they should keep their sacrifices. Jesus came along and told them not to use that “related-to-Abraham” line.

Connection to himself was Jesus’ subject in today’s Gospel lesson. I am the Vine; you are the branches, he said. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. The Jesus-us connection is obvious there, but how about the how of that connection? How is it that there is a Jesus-us connection?

It’s not a naturally occurring thing. Not at all. Jesus is holy. He didn’t have a mean bone in his body – or a jealous bone. Planted by God here on earth, Jesus never produced an angry word or an off-color joke. He never came out with slander or gossip. Jesus never concocted a lie or scheme. Jesus always came out with love and truth. He produced only words and deeds of contentment and kindness in his life on earth.

And we have a connection with him? We who have produced bushels of bitter words and crates of half-truth – we have a connection to Jesus? We who have turned out gallons of angry glares and lustful, covetous stares at people? We who end each day, blighted and dirty with sin, we’re connected with the sinless Jesus? Jesus says: Yes, because in today’s lesson he says: You are already clean. That’s a great statement, especially when Jesus makes it, because he’s not like our children, who sometimes tell us that their hands are clean when their hands are still dirty. Jesus knows what clean is, and he doesn’t – he can’t, because he is holy-clean – call someone clean unless they are clean.

But how can that really be – sin-dirtied you and I, clean? Jesus says: because of the word I have spoken to you.

There’s the connection to Jesus! Not church, not synagogue, not even temple, but the Word that Jesus has spoken to us. The Word that Jesus has spoken to us, along with the water of Baptism; the words of Jesus through sermons, classes, devotions, and personal Bible reading; the words Jesus

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speaks to us – along with the bread and wine that he gives us in his Supper – that’s how you are connected to Jesus.

The Word connects you to Jesus because it tells you that Jesus put the bumper crop of love, truth and kindness produced in his life on the altar of a cross as a sacrifice for our stunted thoughts, for our sin-blighted words and actions. The Word that Jesus has spoken to you says that Jesus’ sacrifice was accepted by God, because God restored Jesus to life on Easter. And the word that Jesus has spoken to you says that God credited the fruitful life of Jesus to us; and instead of tossing us on the compost heap or into the burning barrel of hell, God declares us clean and claims us as his own.

Jesus’ speaking those things connects you to him, because it draws you to faith in him, to believe and latch on to Jesus’ fruitful life and death for sinners. And that faith-connection to the clean Jesus is a truly precious connection, because it will get us into the forever harvest festival of God’s heaven!

2. To produce for the glory of God

You’re making a connection of your own here, right? The connection that we don’t ever want to drop our connection with Jesus. We will want to stay connected to Jesus.

The teachers and students in our congregation’s school hear those last four words in a monthly news DVD that our church body produces for kids. It’s called “Kid’s Connection,” and each segment ends with someone saying: “Stay connected to Jesus!”

Jesus loves that tagline, because he says through John: \textit{Remain in me, and I will remain in you}. But how do you remain in – how do you stay connected to – Jesus? He says: \textit{If you remain in me and my words remain in you}. Again, not holding church membership or helping with church stuff, but the words that Jesus has spoken to us – the words that connected us to Jesus in the first place – that’s what keeps people connected to Jesus.

“Stay connected to Jesus” is good encouragement, not just for kids, but for teenagers and adults, too, because many people who were once connected to Jesus have disconnected or are in the process of disconnecting themselves from him. Some of you have family members and friends who are doing a disconnect from Jesus and the words he has spoken. They don’t read the Bible or other Bible-based materials. They seldom gather to hear the words Jesus speaks in sermons or at his Communion meal.

Oh, they may look and sound all right, like the people they were back when they were connected to Jesus with us; but don’t be fooled. It’s not a productive situation. Jesus says: \textit{Apart from me you can do nothing}.

It’s like if you disconnect a branch from a grape vine or fruit tree. It may have green leaves and blossoms at the time; however the branch will produce no fruit, even though it produced fruit last season. Disconnecting from Jesus, from reading, hearing and studying the words he has spoken can’t be productive, either. Hear Jesus again: \textit{No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine}. \textit{Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me}. If anyone does not remain in me, he (or she, too!) \textit{is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire, and burned}.

But stay connected to Jesus, encourage and get disconnected people to reconnect to Jesus and the words he speaks, and it’s entirely different. Great things happen. Hear again the words that Jesus spoke: \textit{If a man (a person, any person) remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit}.

Humanly speaking fruit bearing won’t always be enjoyable, because Jesus says that his heavenly \textit{Father is the gardener}. And what does a gardener do with a branch that is producing fruit? A good gardener \textit{prunes} it so that it will be even more fruitful.

Sometimes we may feel that we are getting our ears pinned back by God. He may trim back our ego and pride, even put us flat on our physical backs with medical or other setbacks. Ouch! That hurts, but it’s not all bad, because it will make us more humble, more dependent on God, more gentle, more patient - more like Jesus.

And that, Jesus says, \textit{is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples}. Connected by Jesus to Jesus, we want to stay clean and be harvested for heaven. Here and now, we want to also live lives that make Jesus and God look good – because they are good! We want to live lives that help other people see the Jesus to whom we’re connected. And you can live that kind of life. Just stay connected to Jesus! Amen.