

“Revealing Relationships”
John 13:34-35 and John 15:5-17

We human beings like to use metaphors and similes. It's the way we learn. It's the way we express our sense of life's meaning and purpose. We take something we know well, and use it as an image by which we understand something else. Jesus used a lot of metaphors in his teaching, and some of the most compelling ones are those that help us see our relationship with God in organic terms. Jesus says that our connection with God, and ultimately, with each other, is like the connections that exist between a farmer and fields; between soil and seeds; between vines and branches; between plants and fruit. Jesus teaches us that we are connected with God and each other with the same kind of vitality and interdependence that we see in the world of nature. Today we're going to focus on how God's life flows through us and into our relationships, so that our lives become a revelation of God's love in the world.

The metaphor Jesus builds on in this section of John's gospel is that of a vine and its branches. "I am the true vine," Jesus says. Addressing us he says, "You are the branches." If we are the branches, then we've got to stay connected to the vine if we want to really live. That is, in order to have true life; the kind of life God wants us to have; the kind of life that will bring us true joy and peace and love and happiness and wholeness and fulfillment - we must remain connected to Jesus. If we don't, we're going to shrivel up and be of no use to anyone, like dead branches that get thrown away and burned. Note that he doesn't say we will be burned. He just says we'll be like those useless dead branches that are disposed of. But if we do stay connected to the vine, to Jesus, then he promises that we will bear fruit - namely love and joy. It glorifies God when we bear the fruit of love and joy, because by this God is revealed to the world. God can be revealed through us and through our relationships!

Let's look more deeply at how this works. To begin with, Jesus explains how the vine and branches metaphor is to be understood. Just as life-giving nutrients flow from the earth and environment into the vine, and on from the vine into the branches, which in turn produce fruit - Jesus tells us that that God's love flows into Jesus, and through Jesus, into us, with the goal that this love will flow through us to others, and result in our glorifying, worshiping and loving God all the more. He's describing an organic cycle that ties together all of creation and all of our relationships in the ever-flowing stream of God's love. And yet, this only happens if we stay connected to Jesus. If we don't stay connected to Jesus, the cycle is broken and the flow of love is hindered. God still loves Jesus. God still loves us. Jesus still loves us. But if we neglect our relationship with him, that love doesn't continue flowing through us to other people and on back to God. To use a very different metaphor - it's like an incomplete electrical circuit. Alternating current doesn't work unless it has both a source and a return. When the circuit is broken and the current doesn't have a way to return to the source, your electrical appliances aren't going to work. When God's love flows toward us, but we aren't connected to Jesus, that love doesn't affect us. It won't flow through us to others, it won't transform our relationships, and it surely won't result in our love for God. So we've got to stay connected, and Jesus tells us how.

Jesus says that if we love him - if we want to be connected with him - we will obey him. That is, we will follow him, walking the same path that he did. We will do what he said to do and do the kind of things he did. Of course, no metaphor is perfect. Barring human interference, the

branches of a vine have no choice but to be the same kind of plant that the vine is. They might be unhealthy. They might get broken off and disconnected, but they will be the same kind of plant. They have no choice. We do. We can choose to love Jesus and follow him. But it is also possible for us to choose a different way, ignoring or despising Jesus, and living by a very different set of values and priorities. We can choose to be branches of a very different sort than the vine. Jesus is saying that, if we want to stay connected to him, we've got make the choice to be the same kind of plant, we must choose to follow him.

When we do choose to follow Jesus, we will experience fellowship with God. Why is this? It is because Jesus lived a life of unbroken connection with God. He lived with total dedication to the rule of God in his life and in the world. When we align ourselves with Jesus, we are aligning ourselves with God's will for human life. Back to the metaphor of branches and vines – when we stay connected to the branch, we are connected not just to the branch, but to the soil and water from which the vine grows. In the same way, to be connected to Jesus is to be connected to God.

But let's be clear about what it means for this connection with Jesus - this connection with God – to work. We must love one another. We must be loving in our relationships. This is not optional. And when Jesus is the model for our relationships, it is clear that we are to love all people without exception. God so loves the entire world, that God sent his only Son that we might not perish, but have everlasting life. Jesus calls us to love not just our fellow Christians or our friends, but to love even our enemies, and to pray for them. He calls us to reach out to the outcasts, minister to the poor and friendless, and to devote ourselves to justice for those who are oppressed. So, in this passage, when Jesus tells us to love one another, we need to see it in this light. His intention is that we love everyone. No exceptions.

This is how our relationship with God transforms our relationships with other people. In the devotional readings for this week, you've read about a whole range of our human relationships – with parents and children and spouses, with friends and enemies and everyone else. In each and every relationship we have, we are called to be a conduit through which God's love flows into the world.

Of course, we can't help but wonder, what kind of love is it that we are to show? Our society teaches us to view love primarily as a feeling. But the love of God which we are to share isn't about the warm-fuzzies. It's about positive action and sacrifice. Jesus tells us to love one another not just in general terms, but to love each other as he has loved us. How has Jesus loved us? He laid down his life for us. In complete faithfulness to God, he proclaimed God's kingdom, he stood for grace and mercy and peace and justice and equality – even when it put him on a collision course with the Temple leaders and the Roman Empire itself. He remained faithful to God's vision for humanity even though it put him on the cross, trusting that God would vindicate him even though every human might condemn him. This is the kind of love we are to share with others.

Think about your relationships. There are probably people in your life that you don't like, or people with whom you are in conflict. There are certainly also people you feel great warmth and affection for. The way of Jesus is to demonstrate love for both sets of people, no matter how we might feel – and we do this by seeking the well-being of all. This applies to all our

relationships: with spouses and significant others, with parents and children, with friends, and even with strangers and enemies. Whichever relationship you consider, there are certain things that are a necessary part of Christ-like love.

The first is listening. There is no love without listening. That's why the Bible encourages us to pray; it's why Jesus would ask people what they wanted him to do for them; it's the reason for the incarnation itself. God doesn't remain on high casting down commandments, judgments and blessings – God enters into human life in the person of Jesus to show solidarity with us; to listen to us. Perhaps, then, you've got a relationship in which you've stopped listening. Maybe you are too mad at someone to hear them, or what they have to say is too painful to you. In our relationships with our other relatives or friends, we're called to show compassion and understanding. We are called to listen.

Loving like Jesus also involves forgiveness. You can't miss that forgiveness is central to Jesus' ministry. So maybe you're holding a grudge against someone. Let it go. Work with them to give and receive forgiveness and then move on. Don't let yourselves get stuck. There is no love in grudge holding. Remember that, even on the cross, Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them!" I've seen too many relationships (marriages in particular) ruined by the inability to forgive.

A third is sacrifice, laying down your life, and taking risks. There will also be times when the truly loving thing might be to stop being politely quiet about a problem you see, and share your concern. I had one friend whose parents were blatantly racist and one of her friends, who was of another race, very unjustly. It would be easy to remain silent in such a situation, but it wouldn't be loving. To speak out may not win you approval, but allowing people to continue in injustice is not good for anyone. In other cases, you might have to sacrifice something you want for the sake of what someone else wants or needs. Either way, love is costly.

Even in relation to people we see as our enemies, we need to learn to love. Every day we see what happens when we ignore Jesus so that we can hate our enemies. When we allow ourselves to have contempt for others, and to mock them and demonize them, we open the door to all kinds of evil. Observe the so-called culture wars in our nation, or our current level of political discourse. We are in a dangerous place right now because the values of love and justice are being discarded in favor of partisanship, self-righteousness, and fear-mongering – on both ends of the spectrum. This doesn't bring glory to God. To stay connected to Jesus, we've got to learn to love those we feel are our enemies, and find a way to treat each other lovingly and respectfully, even when we disagree and even when their point of view is hard to appreciate.

When our relationships grow out of and reflect the love of God that we experience in Jesus Christ, we reveal God's love to the world. Jesus says that when we produce the fruit of love in our lives, everyone will know that we are his disciples, and that this will bring glory to God. It is to God's glory when we share God's love with one another. This will, in turn, result in people giving thanks to God and loving God so that the circuit is completed; the organic cycle is made whole, and all of creation is tied together in God's love.

The fruit doesn't fall far from the tree. Jesus once said that we will be known by the fruit we produce. Take a look at your life. Are your relationships expressing God's love? Are you kind and compassionate to others, even when you disagree? Do you pursue relationships based in justice and equality and fairness? If someone were to look at your life with an objective eye, would they see God's love flowing through you? If the answer is yes, praise God for that. If not, remember that you can change. You can open your life and relationships to God's love by drawing near to Jesus and by connecting with him. You can do this by choosing to obey Jesus, and committing to love others as he has loved you.