

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ  
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Sermon for the Communion Service February 17, 2006  
Lessons: Deuteronomy 8:1-6 and John 15:1-13

## STAYING CONNECTED

Both scripture lessons issue the same warning: do not cut yourselves off from the source of your new life. For Deuteronomy, the source of Israel's life as God's covenant people is torah – the teachings and commandments of God. So, the human being does not renew life merely by taking in food but by hearing and doing the words of instruction from the LORD, Israel's covenant God. In the Gospel of John, we hear Jesus tell all who follow him and believe in him:

“Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”

This morning, we share the bread and cup of our Communion with God and with each other in Christ. As the crucified Christ whose body was broken and whose blood was shed, Jesus is the source of our new life in hope and salvation. Crucified, he represents God fully to us and is, also, the one who is fully human.

The question is, How do we get from words to action in the living of our daily lives? How do we move from our sacramental union with God and each other in Christ to what Jesus calls the bearing of fruit, the living production of results? How does our connection to Christ hold, and how do we maintain that connection from our side?

Jesus explains our staying connected with him as abiding in his love, and he further explains bearing fruit as becoming his disciples and loving one another. The trouble with our hearing his explanations is that love says everything to us and, therefore, can come to mean nothing in practical terms of making decisions. Some get sentimental and act as though the mere mention of love said everything that needs to be said. Others voice disgust as they dismiss the notion of changing human interactions with love, often saying something sarcastic such as, “Sure, let's all just get together and sing ‘Kum Ba Ya.’”

Jesus' way of self-giving love is particularly scorned by people who see humanity divided into winners and losers and regard themselves as winners. In this view, life is a

competition and history a series of contests – contests of strength and will. The idea of coming together in mutual respect aimed at understanding each other and maybe even sharing earth's resources fairly brings reactions of disdain. Winners take what they have won, and losers give up what they have lost. Jesus was crucified on the very symbol of the proud declaration, "Romans always win." The cross was meant to proclaim for all to see, "This is what happens to people who oppose Rome."

The winners, of course, can be quite kind and even loving once their victory is beyond dispute. This graciousness of the winner is expressed in the idea of philanthropy, which translates to "love of humanity." A philanthropist is a lover or friend of the human race, a benefactor who, having done very well, now demonstrates greatness by doing great good, beyond the measure of the "average Joe." How the benefactor acquired such means is a question supposedly erased by the philanthropy.<sup>1</sup> Life is a contest, and everybody admires a winner. Even envy is a form of admiration.

Jesus is the vine, we the branches meant to bear fruit, but his love is of a very different kind from the benefactor's. Jesus does not share the wealth; he gives up everything for us.

In Christ, life is no longer a contest to be won or lost. The world is not made up of winners and losers but of people all in need of God's grace, whether they know it or not. Kindness is shared across the table. The hierarchy of human life is broken because the Son of God has taken his place with the suffering and shamed at the bottom. Greater love has no one than this.

How, then, do we stay connected with Christ, as he continues to represent God to us and to embody our rightful humanity before God? The old order of human life is shattered, and now we gather around the table as equals, as sisters and brothers who have now come together because he has brought us together, and we belong with him.

Jesus has sent us to meet life's winners and losers alike with self-giving love. We are neither to envy the winners nor scorn the losers but are to address the humanity of both. One's humanity is hidden beneath pride, the other's beneath shame. The losers find respect for their humanity hard to believe; the winners find it repulsive because they expect to be addressed in their success and superiority, not in their common humanity and need for God's grace.

We share the bread and the cup, symbols of our connection with Jesus' brokenness. We pray to keep the connection open, and we listen for God's word speaking to us by the Spirit through the scriptures. We share our thoughts and experiences with others striving to understand life and live it by faith. But as long as these strivings for connection remain just

the practice of religion, that connection will be closed more often than open. Only as, bit by bit, the way of Jesus Christ becomes our way of making choices and decisions, our way of recognizing people different from us as sisters and brothers, and our way of self-giving, do we keep the connection open so his life can flow into ours. Then, we will find ourselves becoming more and more human in the way he is truly human. In time, our old ways of seeing life and people will become to us strange and illogical because we will have learned to think in his way. So, let us gather at the table, here in the sanctuary, then take our Communion out there into life. Amen.

Note:

1. The word philanthropy comes from two Greek words. *Philos* is love in the sense of friendship. *Anthropos* is humanity. So, a philanthropist is a friend or lover of humanity. In John 15, Jesus say the greatest love (using the word *agape*, a more selfless love than *philos*) is given in laying down his life for his “friends” or “loved ones” – his *philo*i. The philanthropist makes people his/her beneficiaries. Jesus makes us his friends, the people he knows and loves, by laying down his life for us.