

Sermon Easter People Stay Connected to Jesus by Pastor Kit Greaves, May 2, 2021

Pray: Lord, give us a word from your word. Amen.

Staying connected is killing us.

We are a culture obsessed with staying connected. We have cell phones, streaming services, text messaging, and GPS tracking. We all need to stay in touch. With family, with work. It can be a valuable tool and it can be overwhelming.

An article in yesterday's Toronto Star quoted a Sage Canada survey that nearly half of Canadian business leaders and nearly one third of employees cited burn out as a concern for the remainder of 2021. The federal Labour Minister Filomena Tassi said workers, up to 5 million Canadians who now work from home, are working nearly 2.5 hours longer per day than pre-pandemic. They need the ability to avoid work emails and messages in off hours. This is known as the "right to disconnect." "People are actually working too much and it's taking over their lives, they are experiencing ennui, a languishing state of mind" says Francoise Mathieu executive director of TEND, a Kingston-based organization offering wellness exercises for high-stress workplaces. Even clergy are facing burn out. Our diocese is addressing this through our EAP, mental health emails we get regularly - yet another email!! And this week we have a psychologist on a Zoom call to raise awareness and listen. We'll get to some 'nano' strategies, small things we can do, for anyone of us to tackle the problem of our ennui, our state of languishing, in a few minutes. Stay with me!

To what or to whom you're connected, makes a difference.

Today's Gospel reading deals with being connected. Jesus describes the divine connection between his followers and him as similar to that of a vine and branches. The vine gives us life. Connected to Jesus, we have life and we bear fruit.

Is anybody into gardening? When I was in high school my parents grew a huge pumpkin in our backyard garden. My dad entered the pumpkin in a contest sponsored by a Radio station. I thought, "hmm, a pumpkin, on a radio show. This should be good." Parentals said take the day off school to help lift the blessedly big thing into the station wagon, and off we went to the Parliament Street studio in Toronto. "What was the secret to growing such a large pumpkin," the radio host asked my dad live on air. Dad said, "the garden is located above the septic tank weeping tiles, good moisture, good soil and voila!" Also, he pruned back the little suckers so only one pumpkin could grow. Pruning can be painful. Hauling the winning pumpkin weighing hundreds of pounds, was painful, then it was hauled to the Royal Winter Fair, where we discovered it had won first prize, signified by a lovely blue and gold ribbon, the biggest pumpkin on the radio.

Christians have always understood humankind to have a special place in creation. As human beings we are not of ourselves everlasting beings like the angels, nor are we confined to a mere physical existence like birds, mammals, or fish but we can exist in the realm of thought and emotional attachment though separated by distance or time. We are not gods. We do not become gods, but through the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives—the sap that flows through the vine—we take on godlike characteristics. Though we are not gods, we have the life of God flowing through us. Alive in Christ we become atuned to the Spirit living in us. Spiritually aware. My wife Dianne participated yesterday in an online conference called *Aware, Anglican Women Alive, Renewed, Enriched* with 125 other women from across the Diocese, a virtual connection that was uplifting. Christ Church's men's bible study, Screwtape letters discussion group and Alpha make these connections as well. Thank God for Zoom, most of the time!

We are branches, connected to the root of life by the vine. This is a dramatically different image than picturing God pouring out God's blessings upon us like the sun shines and gives life to the plants and animals of creation. The image is being connected to God, with God's life, power, and blessings flowing through us. The emphasis is on the internal rather than the external.

REMAIN IN JESUS Jesus encourages his followers to remain in him. With the invitation to remain, comes with it the acknowledgement that we can separate ourselves from Jesus, the vine.

The term "remain" is defined as "dwelling with," or "pitching your tent with." Our relationship with Jesus is nurtured and sustained by remaining in him—connected. Not remaining in God, we can become like someone for whom work in an overly connected world is all there is. Even our entertainment during the pandemic is on a screen. One of the vastly under used and under accessed resources is that the inner life of the Spirit to give us perspective, to disconnect from what sucks life and re-connect to a life-flow God always intended humans to have, to abide in.

We nurture our faith relationship by: Seeing life as a journey—one where we walk with Jesus through life, as opposed to striving to get to him in heaven.

Realizing that we dwell with Jesus when we are about God's will and not ours.

“ Practicing spiritual disciplines enable us to nurture our relationship with Jesus and open ourselves to the life that flows through us.

A rule of life can function like guide rails on the highway helping us mind the boundaries, moving forward, or stopping by a lakeside, as a thinking spot, to read psalm, sing a praise song, say a prayer. We can resist the connection and miss the abiding, the fruit, not of anxiety but miss the fruit of the relationship, like a young child resisting rules. Clinical psychologist Jordan Peterson writes in Rule 5 of his *12 Rules for Life* book,

“We assume that rules will irremediably inhibit what would otherwise be the boundless and intrinsic creativity of our children, even though scientific literature clearly indicates that strict limitations, solid connections, facilitate rather than inhibit creative achievement.

Imagine a toddler repeatedly striking his mother on the face. Why would he do such a thing? It's a stupid question. The answer is obvious. To dominate his mother. To see if he can get away with it. Violence, after all, is no mystery. It's peace that's the mystery. Violence is the default. It's easy. It's the peace that's difficult: learned, inculcated, earned. (People often get basic psychological questions backwards, Peterson writes. Why do people take drugs? Not a mystery. It's why they don't take drugs all the time that's a mystery. Why do people suffer from anxiety? That's not a mystery. How is it that people can be calm? There's the mystery. We're breakable and mortal. A million things can go wrong, in a million ways. We should be terrified out of our skulls at every second. But we're not.)

Children hit first because aggression is innate, although more dominant in some individuals and less in others, writes Peterson. It's foolish to assume such behaviour must be learned. A snake does not have to be taught to strike. It's in the nature of the beast. Two yr olds, statistically speaking are the most violent of people (Pg 126). They kick, hit and bite and they steal the property of others. They do so to explore, to express outrage and frustration, and to gratify their impulsive desires. More importantly, they do so to discover the true limits of permissible behaviour. How else are they ever going to puzzle out what is acceptable? Infants are blind people, searching for a wall. They have to push forward, and test, to see where the actual boundaries lie. Consistent correction of such action indicates the limits of acceptable aggression in a child. It's absence merely heightens the curiosity so the child will hit and bite and kick. How hard can I hit mommy or daddy, or grandpa or grandma? Until they object. Given that, correction is better sooner than later. Correction also helps the child learn that hitting others is a sub-optimal social strategy. Peterson goes on to talk about discipline and punishment, limiting rules and using minimal necessary force.

There is application here when it comes to Jesus' statement ⁴Abide 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. He is talking minimal necessary force, about pruning, removing branches in him that are not bearing fruit. I think he is saying this: the nature of the beast, when you and I abide in Christ, the beauty of the beast, is that we bear fruit, fruit that shapes character. Abiding bears fruit. You don't have to work at it. Abiding bears fruit.

Abiding in the vine is abiding in the presence of the Holy Spirit on our lives. Consciousness of God is not a mental effort; it's a heart effort. It's not a mental exercise; it's a heart exercise. It's a place of yielding, surrender, acknowledgement; our mind follows behind and gains understanding as it matures, but it begins here, in our heart of hearts, in absolute surrender. The farther you go, the less you take with you. In this place of consciousness of God, you can imagine being attached. Everything you do in life, everything you are comes from being attached here, the

vine. The branch doesn't grow on its own, and contend and fight for growth of grapes. You don't have to claim grapes, I declare grapes, I confess grapes, no weapon formed against me will prosper, you don't hear any of that. If you stay connected, grapes are natural. There is some fruit in our lives that are not the result of effort; they are the result of connection. Pastor Bill Johnson says, Living in awareness of God is the ambition of the Lord, it's not just a mental exercise; it's a heart-felt realization.

BEAR FRUIT The branches that are connected to the vine will naturally bear fruit. The fruit that the branches bear, glorifies God.

One type of fruit that we bear is the fruit of the Spirit. Taking on the characteristics of God both glorifies God and bears witness to God's power to those around us. Fruit of his word, of joy, of God's love filling us. Paul elaborates nine aspects of the fruit of the Spirit in Gal 5:22.

Another fruit is that of people who see God's love and power in our words and deeds and respond to that love by placing their faith in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Branches are not intended to be brittle, dry, and dead. Branches are expected to bear fruit. As Christians we grow in the strength of our faith, our lives take on the characteristics of God, and we are bold and loving in our witness. Easter People stay connected to Jesus. All of these are natural consequences of being connected to the vine.

The questions we might ask ourselves: what are the non-life-giving connections that are pulling us down? What needs pruning? From what do we need to disconnect so we can re-connect with Christ?

Here are some nano strategies: shut down your work systems outside office hours. Actually turn off your computer. Disable email functions from work on your phone or smart watch. Let people know you're not available after a certain hour, and not to expect a response. Consider a social media cleanse; again, let people know you're off Fbk for the weekend. Read a book instead of looking at a screen before bed. Listen to music. I got my guitar out last night and Dianne and I sang praise songs for a half hour and thought about our son Nicholas' wedding to Alex in three weeks. No TV. Figure out for ourselves what habits and behaviours can lead to deepening your life-giving connection with Jesus. Tell him about your day before sleeping.

CONCLUSION The Christian life is not one of trying harder. We are not the centre of attention. Jesus is the focus. Connected to Jesus, the vine, God's life runs through us. Transformed, we transform the world in which we live. Easter People stay connected to Jesus. Amen