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John 15:1-8

“A Crisis Of Connection”

This morning I'd like to talk about what I'll call a “crisis of connection.” I first started thinking about the depth of this “crisis of connection” some time ago when I watched a TED Talk titled “Everything You Know About Addiction Is Wrong.”

In this talk, Johann Hari describes how he relates to the addicts in his life. He said, “I always try to communicate to them, “I love you whether you are using or not. I love you whatever state you are in and if you need me, I'll come and sit with you, because I love you and I don't want you to feel alone.”

Hari concluded his TED Talk by saying, “For a hundred years now, we've been singing war songs about addicts.” He said, “I think, all along, we should have been singing love songs to them, because the opposite of addiction is not sobriety. The opposite of addiction is connection.”

In his work, Hari quotes Professor John Cacioppo of the University of Chicago, one of the world's leading experts on loneliness. Cacioppo claims that for a human being, being acutely lonely is as bad for your health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

He claims that one of the reasons you and I exist is because our ancestors on the savannahs of Africa were really good at one thing. They often weren't bigger or faster than the animals they encountered, but they were much better at banding together into a tribe and cooperating. He says, “Just like bees evolved to need a hive, humans evolved to need a tribe.”

Given everything going on in the world today, I think it's a compelling argument that much of what ails us as in our personal lives and in society stems from feeling disconnected. We hear about people joining gangs, not because they craved a life of crime and destructive behavior, but because in the gang they felt a sense of belonging. They felt valued.

I don't know if it's objectively verified, but there's concern that many young people spend so much time on video games and smart phones they're not connecting with others

in meaningful ways. They might lack the social skills necessary to relate to other human beings.

We're seeing the effects of children and youth being out of school during this pandemic. The lack of social interaction with their peers seems to have caused an increase in mental health issues, depression and anxiety. I don't think it's overstating it to say that, in our world today, we're experiencing something of a "crisis of connection."

That's why this image of Jesus offers in our reading is so important. In the Old Testament, a metaphor that is sometimes used for the people of God is that of a vineyard. God is the vineyard owner or the vineyard planter and Israel is the vineyard.

Today, we use different metaphors to describe the church. Perhaps the family is the most common. When you join the church, you become part of the family. Another New Testament image is that of a body. Paul describes the church in his first letter to the Corinthians. He wrote, "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it (1 Corinthians 12:27)."

Today, I invite you to think of the church as a vineyard. Jesus described it. He said, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He goes on to say, "I am the vine, you are the branches." So, the first thing is that it all starts with God. God plants. God creates the vineyard. Jesus is the vine that makes it possible for the branches to exist and to flourish.

Secondly, the whole purpose of the vineyard is to produce fruit. It doesn't exist for itself. The whole point is to produce something, to have something to offer the world. I'm sure those of you who are wine enthusiasts can appreciate this. The fruit of the vineyard brings joy and sustenance into the world.

In the same way, the church doesn't exist for itself. We're a vineyard. As a church, we're supposed to produce fruit. All our meetings, our planning, our rituals, and all our organizing is supposed to result in something we can offer the world. That fruit we produce is our good works. It's our expressions of love to people in community.

That may be why many churches are struggling today. There may be all kinds of activity going on. They might be maintaining their buildings and having lots of meetings, but they aren't assuring that all their activity produces actual fruit. The hungry aren't being fed. The naked aren't being clothed. They aren't making an impact on the lives of

people in their neighborhood. They aren't doing anything to make the world a better and more just place for everyone.

In a passage that in my Bible is titled *The Song of the Unfruitful Vineyard*, the prophet Isaiah says, "For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry (Isaiah 5:7)!"

The vineyard begins with God, the vinegrower. The purpose of the vineyard is to produce fruit. Lastly, Jesus talks about what is necessary for the vineyard to produce fruit. That is connection. He said, "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."

It's all about connection. As long as the branch is connected to the vine, it can grow, and flourish, and produce fruit. Without that connection, the branch can only wither and die. I love this as an image for the church. Each one of us is a branch that maintains its connection to Jesus, the true vine.

Together, we produce fruit. As a church, we make an offering to the world bringing joy and sustenance and peace. And it's all about our connection to our source. It's about grounding ourselves in the Word, and in prayer, and in praise, and in community, and in acts of love and mercy.

I actually have some experience with vines. Apparently, the person who lived in the house I grew up in before us was an agriculturalist. Right in Massachusetts, we had a peach tree, an apple tree, and a pear tree in our yard. I don't remember much of the fruit being edible, but it was interesting.

There was a big bunch of raspberries in the field behind the house, which was great. Much to the chagrin of my sister and myself, there was also an endless supply of asparagus. Today, I would love it! Back then, I didn't do asparagus.

There were also grapevines in the trees and what I remember about it was that these vines were a big, tangled mess. The branches were almost indistinguishable from one another. They all ran together as they grew out of the vine. You couldn't pull them apart, because they all wrapped around one another. You couldn't tell where one branch stopped and another started.

What a fabulous image for the church during a crisis of connection! Each of us is a branch growing from the vine and our lives are interwoven together. At times, it can be a little messy and unruly, but no branch is more or less important than any other. We just kind of blend. And the most important thing is our connection to the vine, to Jesus. That's what maintains our life together and allows us to bear the fruit we offer to the world.

Our target for worshipping indoors again is May 16th. Pastor Dan, Wendell, and I gathered with the deacons here in the sanctuary to plan how everything will go when you arrive. For many of the deacons, it was their first time being in the sanctuary in over a year. I was moved to see how folks were responding to being in this place they missed so much.

I get why people are so eager to worship in person. I get why being in the sanctuary is so important. Gathering in community and being in sacred space are the ways we feel connected to the divine. I get why people have wanted to risk gathering. Without vital connection, it feels like a part of us withers and dies.

The good news is that we can survive difficult times. We can weather the storms of life. We can persevere in times of drought. All we have to do is stay connected.