

THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER: April 29th 2018
St. John's Lutheran Church, Summit, NJ John 15:1-8 (B)
"Staying Connected"

Grace be to you and peace from God our Creator, Redeemer, and Life-giving Spirit. Amen.

His name is Theodore Hagan. "Ted" was what the adults called him, but he'll always be "Mr. Hagan" to me. His name, "Theodore" means "gift of God", and that's exactly what he was. Mr. Hagan had one of the most wonderful, rich, resonant bass voices that I've ever heard. He sang in the Senior Choir at Janes United Methodist Church, the church that I grew up in Philadelphia.

I have fond memories of being a child at Janes and listening to Mr. Hagan sing; for his singing was both soothing and stirring, and it deeply touched my spirit. But what made Mr. Hagan's singing even more powerful was the fact that he believed what he was singing; these anthems and hymns were a testimony to his faith!

One of my favorites among the Ted Hagan solos was a hymn called, "Without God, I Can Do Nothing". The refrain went like this:

Without God I can do nothing; without God, I would fail.

Without God my life would be empty, like a ship without a sail...

I've always remembered those words, "without God, I can do nothing", because they're true. And the older I get, the more I realize just how true they are! We may think that we're in control and that we're able to be self-sufficient. But it only takes a crisis --- a recently diagnosed illness or death; the prospect of losing a job, or the break-up of a relationship, to remind us that we are really not our own, and that we are really not in control!

Just ask any of those people who traumatized by that Waffle House shooting, or the massacre in Toronto, or the people all over the country from countries all around the world who are scared about being deported, and they'll tell you that we're not the ones in charge.

Many people who have lived through devastating disasters, whether natural or human-made, report learning or realizing that "the most important thing in life is not things, but rather the people whom you love and those who love you." It's relationships that are central --- our relationships with God, with one another, and with ourselves.

More than 2,000 years ago, Jesus needed to remind his disciples of this fact too, because he was going away --- he was going to die. He wanted them to understand that they were not their own, independent agents, but that they were interdependent. They were connected to a deeper, richer source of life and love, of healing and hope. They were connected to Him --- the source of all life, and they always would be, even after he was gone.

So Jesus said to his disciples, in what was part of his farewell address to them, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Abide in me as I abide in you. "Abide" --- it's not a word we use or hear much today except when we sing that beautiful old evening hymn, "Abide With Me". Five times in these short verses Jesus says, "abide in me", so it's clear that he really wants the disciples to get this message. This is not a time for them to be hard-headed, because Jesus is on the way to his death.

It probably seems strange for us to be hear lessons like this during the Easter season, during this time of resurrection and new life which is budding and blooming all around us. But for too many Christians, Easter isn't a season, it's just a day; and once that festive day is over, they're back to business as usual -- back to life lived on their own terms, in their own ways. For folks who

are too busy to daily celebrate the newness that God so longs to give, maybe scripture texts like this are important wake-up calls.

“Abide in me,” says Jesus. “You’re a part of me, and I’m a part of you. We’re connected”. And Jesus doesn’t want us to abide in him simply for our own benefit. He wants us to stay connected because he has a greater purpose in mind. He wants and expects us to bear fruit. Listen again to what he says: “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.”

There it is, that song of Mr. Hagan’s --- “without Jesus Christ, the true vine, we can do nothing.” Oh sure, we can do lots of things, but not those things which will help bring people closer to God and God’s kingdom. Without Jesus, we can bear no fruit, heal no hurts, bind up no broken hearts. Without Jesus, our sense of justice may often mean, “just us”. But when we abide, when we stay connected to Jesus, we can bear fruit; we can witness to the life-giving, renewing and liberating power of God’s love in our lives.

Without Jesus sisters and brothers, we, the Church, are powerless. We stay connected to Jesus because our primary purpose as the people of God is to bear fruit, and thus to glorify our God. We don’t talk too much about glorifying God in our Lutheran churches; and maybe that’s because some of our more charismatic or Pentecostal brothers and sisters have scared us off with all their praise and glory talk.

But this is indeed our aim and our end --- to glorify God --- to make God’s presence known and felt in this world; to show to the world that this Easter story is not just some fairy-tale, but is the

deepest revelation of the mysteries of God, lived out from generation to generation, until the kingdom of God comes in all its fullness. So we abide in Jesus in order to bear fruit. And there is no better fruit for disciples of Jesus to bear than his all-inclusive love for the whole human family!

The poet e.e. cummings once said of a friend, "His only wealth was love and he spent his fortune extravagantly; always and everywhere." That's how Jesus wants us to bear fruit --- by spending the fortune of endless love that God has given to us extravagantly --- always and everywhere.

Love knows no boundaries; it doesn't keep track of one's country of origin, or the color of one's skin, or of one's class, or customs, or culture --- except, that is, to celebrate and marvel in them. Love doesn't shy away from sickness or adversity, it doesn't run when the going gets tough. Love, especially God's love, abides; it remains, it stays forever. And how much the world needs to experience this kind of love today!

Can you imagine being the kind of lover who forgives betrayal, denial, and rejection? Can you imagine loving someone who is such an outcast that nobody wants to touch you or loving the most unlovable, strange or sinful people in your family or community? Yet that's what Jesus did. He loved lepers, sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors, and even the smelly fisher-folk who deserted him at the last. These are the unsavory types that Jesus stooped to love. And these are precisely the kinds of people that Jesus is still reaching out to love and to save --- including you and me.

But here's the rub --- we can not possibly love others in the way that Jesus Christ loves us unless we stay connected to him, unless we remain attached to the One who is the true vine. It is only as his life is pulsing in us, his love beating in our hearts, his love reaching out through our arms

to lift up and embrace the hurting and helpless children of God --- it is only as Jesus abides in us and we abide in him that we will be able to bear fruit and glorify God.

At 12 step meetings, like AA and others, there is usually a time when the 12 traditions are read. One of the traditions says, "Ours is a program of attraction, not promotion." In other words, people in the rooms don't have to sell anything to anyone, they simply work their programs and people will see the recovery that they have, and want it for themselves.

Shouldn't the Church of Jesus Christ be this way too? Shouldn't people see our love and compassion, our generosity and forgiving ways so they are drawn to Christ and his church and not alienated from us? How wonderful it would be if people saw the light of God's love shining in us and be drawn to that light! And this morning Jesus is saying to us that the more we stay connected to him the better our sense of mission will be, the stronger our lights will shine; the deeper our love will be.

Today, and every Sunday, we connect with Christ through word and sacrament, through gathering together at this holy meal in this community of the faithful. As we come to the table let us remember Jesus' words: "Abide in me as I abide in you. I am the vine and you are the branches... My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples." May we be some of the most fruitful disciples in this corner of God's kingdom. Amen.

Rev. Gladys G. Moore