

Easter 5 (B)
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Text: John 15:1-8

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I'd like to share with you a very brief version of the story of my life. I grew up in Southern California, graduated from high school there, then went to college in Tacoma, Washington. After graduating, I worked as a translator for a few years, while also taking classes in ancient Semitic languages, which became part of the path that led me to becoming a pastor. During that time I was also married to a wonderful woman named Laura. Sadly, she died when I was in my early 30s. During the really hard months after her death, I decided to leave pastoral ministry and study to become a physical therapist, so I moved to Albuquerque to attend the University of New Mexico. While I was there, I met Melinda. We became friends, and then began dating. I ended up returning to work as a pastor in New Mexico. Melinda and I were married, and welcomed two beautiful boys into our life—Nathan and Andrew. I love Portland, and I love serving with Melinda as pastors at First Immanuel. I feel my life is truly blessed.

And now, if you'll indulge me, I'd like to tell you the same story again, but with a very different sort of focus. Throughout my life, I've been surrounded by some truly amazing people. Sometimes I've experienced them as nurturing, sometimes challenging, but they have all had a significant impact on my life. I can't begin to express my gratitude for the love my parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles showed me. Growing up, my church was a place where I felt belonging, and where my imagination was shaped by stories of Jesus. All through life I've had many wonderful teachers and mentors—from college professors who challenged me, to seminary professors whose love of scholarship nurtured a deep love of learning in me, to colleagues and congregation members who helped me learn how to really be a pastor. There have been some seasons in life that have been truly difficult and painful, but there have also been friends who helped me find my way. Being married and being a parent are some of my deepest joys. In recent years, I'd say I'm becoming much more aware of some of the ways my life is connected to and stimulated by wide circles of relationships and influences. Perhaps you can see that this retelling values relationships rather than facts or accomplishments.

It seems to me that, in our culture, that first way of telling the story comes as second nature. My story is about me, and what I've accomplished and the things I've done. But in our gospel reading for today, Jesus speaks to us with deep wisdom about how we're all connected, and how his life moves through all of us together. I wonder whether, with the year we've just lived through, if our hearts might be more open to Jesus' wisdom, maybe even longing for Jesus' wisdom. We have been learning a lot about connectedness this year, learning how important, how essential it is to be connected. We've learned that lesson the hard way, through loneliness,

through a necessary distance from each other. The pandemic has affected our work arrangements, how our families function. We haven't been going out to eat in restaurants or getting to see friends at parties. And even when we're with others, we wear masks, we keep a safe distance. It makes us keenly aware of how much our well-being depends on human connection.

And that is especially true about being followers of Jesus. Christian faith is never just an individual thing. It's a community thing. It's about being connected to each other, and through our life together, experiencing our connection to Jesus, the connection that gives us life and strength and vision and purpose. This year we've had to get creative about experiencing that connection. We worship together on Zoom. We've moved Sunday School and Forum discussions online. Our Outreach Committee has been wonderfully inventive, using simple, written care cards to create a sense of connection and community, to share just a little bit of love. All of these experiences can help us appreciate Jesus' wisdom. He pictures our lives for us this way: he is the vine—the source of strength and life. We are the branches—in our lives is where beautiful fruit grows, fruit that feeds and strengthens and blesses God's beloved world. Branches that aren't connected to the vine have no real life flowing through them, and they just wither. It takes being connected to the vine for a branch to fulfill its purpose, to experience its real reason for being.

I wonder about the ways you experience your connection to Christ, those experiences where you feel alive and part of something so much bigger than just the small circle of daily routines. To feel joy when we gather for worship, whether it's the joy of seeing people you love, or the joy of singing out your love for God, or the joy of being reminded of the power of love and forgiveness—that is being connected to Christ the vine. To really make connections with other people, whether it's sharing friendships with other Christians, or really listening to someone with a very different life-experience than yours—that is being connected to Christ the vine. To be energized by the beauty of the natural world, to take a walk in the fresh morning air and give thanks for the wonder of God's creation—that is being connected to Christ the vine. To share love anywhere, to act with compassion, to advocate for justice for neighbors in need—that is being connected to Christ the vine.

Christ promises a surprising blessing to all of us branches who are connected to him. He says that God will prune us, which might make us a little nervous, especially if you've ever seen how grapevines get pruned back after the growing season. It can seem a bit aggressive. But I imagine Jesus would have us keep two things in mind. First, the one who does the pruning is the One who loves us most of all. In fact, the pruning itself is an act of love, removing any diseased or dead growth—perhaps removing from us selfishness or resentments, unkindness or

fearfulness, so that a bold, loving, courageous, compassionate life can flourish in us. And second, pruning is all about growing an abundance of good and beautiful fruit. God wants our lives to be productive, to be a source of blessing to the world. Pruning is all about generating the best, most beautiful gifts we can give—whether that is through nurturing our children, or through any relationship where there is caring, giving, listening, sharing, in some way serving the common good. I wonder how God wants to bless the world through you. And I wonder what kind of attitudes or expectations or fears need to be pruned away in order to grow those blessings—to grow that kind of beautiful fruit.

Dear people of God, Jesus makes an even more amazing promise to you, the branches through whom his life is flowing, and through whom he wants to grow beautiful fruit. Jesus invites you to ask for anything in his name—that is, anything that is consistent with his character, consistent with his mission to bring the reign of God to life—and he says it will be done for you. You can ask Jesus for anything—like deeper love and patience for difficult people, or the capacity to respond to wrong with forgiveness, or a hunger for justice for all people. Ask for anything that looks like Jesus, and it will be done for you. It all depends on being connected, so that Christ's life flows through you and through the whole vine. It may involve some pruning away of things that don't serve God's intentions. But the result—it will be so beautiful. You will be so beautiful—a reflection of Christ's very own life. Thanks be to God. Amen.