

**Connect / Disconnect**  
John 15:1-11 The Message

A minister of a large Presbyterian congregation in the city of Belfast, Northern Ireland, and some members of his church decided to take a religious census among some 2000 homes in their district. When the results were in, the pastor of the church found himself seated at his desk, confronted with a huge heap of reports, and he began to note any comments made by the visitors doing the survey. One remark that occurred again and again was, "Used to be a Presbyterian; now belongs nowhere." Or, "The children go to Sunday School, but the parents aren't interested." And then he glanced at one unusual comment at the foot of one of the pages which set his mental wheels turning. It read simply, "Presbyterian, but disconnected."

"Disconnected." That's a fascinating word. It sounds as though somebody had yanked the plug on the man. Or perhaps he had pulled the plug on himself. No longer was he connected with the church in which he was raised, or connected with any other church, for that matter. There is a rather sad sound to the word "disconnected" because God created us to be connected with Himself *and* with one another. As John Wesley put it, "The New Testament knows of no such thing as solitary Christianity."

To be a Christian at all is to be in relationship with other Christians. Anyone and everyone who belong to Jesus Christ automatically belong to anyone and everyone else who belong to Jesus Christ. Christianity is relational. Vertical – with God. Horizontal – with fellow believers.

As Tom read about the vine and the branches, you gardening types got the picture clearly. Jesus wanted the people around him to get the idea that life was all about relationships: the vine, or the trunk, and the branches. Interdependent.

I think I used to see this as a one-way thing. I liked that concept, because it meant that I could be rather passive, just sit back and receive all the life-giving juices. The energy being drawn up through the vine, and distributed through the branches to us, was what this parable was all about. We really didn't have to do anything because it wasn't about us, it was about the Vine.

Then when I tried another metaphor, the truth behind this parable became clearer. Jesus could have put it this way:

"I am the Electricity. You are the toaster. Every toaster that no longer makes toast and is no longer useful to me, has become disconnected, and needs to be discarded, or repaired, because the function of a toaster is to make toast. If a vine doesn't produce grapes there's something wrong with the branch, because that's what a branch of a vine is supposed to do. So even if the energy is coming from an outside source and being channeled into my being, there needs to be some results from the relationship. If there aren't any results, I'm afraid it's the compost heap for me.

Relationships are never just one way. I've known that. *It's never just "all about me"* or it is not a relationship. Let's pretend a modern day Jesus *is* saying "I'm providing the electrical current, but I expect the smell of bread being toasted as you, in

relationship with me, do what a toaster does: makes toast. Or, do what branches do: produce fruit. But either side of the equation does not work by itself. If the toaster is disconnected? No results. If the branch becomes separated from the vine? No results.

Some of you sat in on Dr. Linda Mintle's course on "Making Relationships Work" two weekends ago at the Ruth Graham and Friends conference. She said that there are two absolutely essential elements in every relationship. The first is a "Strong emotional bond." The second is "Repair damage quickly."

Strong Emotional Bond. There must be love to make a relationship work. "Like" is a good start. But there must be a genuine love that undergirds the relationship. God's love for us is a known quantity. 1 John 4:10 says: "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." God took the initiative. God's love was so great for His human creation that He took on human flesh. And to me, the truly interesting thing is that, as Tom read, Jesus looked at this relationship as something different than Master and Servant. He said:

"I'm no longer calling you servants because servants don't understand what their master is thinking and planning. No, I've named you friends because I've let you in on everything I've heard from the Father." John 15:15 Msg

Jesus is God having taken on skin. And yet, even as God, desires this relationship to have a degree of mutuality, of give and take. As we read the scriptures we come away in awe of the fact that God the Creator genuinely loves us, in fact *created* us for companionship. In God's courtship of each one of us, He went to 'nth degree to prove it. And then asks us to:

"Love one another as I have loved you." John 15:12. That's the fruit. That's the toast. And, that's a very high standard - one that very few of us seem to be able to embody. Perhaps that is because so many of our relationships are really not relationships at all, but simply something that's all about us - the "me, myself and I" syndrome.

*Those* human relationships, as you know, go only one way. "You're so lucky to have me as a friend, a spouse, a companion." And more often than not, I've observed, it's the man that is the problem. In many patriarchal societies, still, the marriage is based on the man's self-perceived superiority and the woman's submissive giving-in to the husband's wishes. Mutuality doesn't exist. Sort of like my previous misunderstanding of our Bible reading today - how wonderful to just have all of the Vine's energy flowing in - the sap of life just for me, "Mr. Absolutely Wonderful Branch! I failed to realize that God wanted something back. Fruit! Love! Or, as in my somewhat suspect paraphrase that will never make the sacred canon - toast!

Linda Mintle said that the second essential in every relationship was to repair damage quickly. We read in Ephesians

"Don't get so angry that you sin. Don't go to bed angry and don't give the devil a chance." Ephesians 4:26, 27

Replaying the tapes of "he said, she said" only make us miserable. So don't crawl in beside him or her without talking it out, and using that word "sorry", and meaning it. In that old classic movie *Love Story* with Ryan O'Neal and Ali McGraw the following line is used twice. Help me finish it: "Love means never ... (having to say you're sorry).

Now this is funny: towards the end of the 1972 screwball comedy *What's Up, Doc?*, which also stars Ryan O'Neal, Barbra Streisand's character coos that "Love

means never having to say you're sorry" while batting her eyelashes. O'Neal's character responds, deadpan, "That's the dumbest thing I ever heard."<sup>i</sup>

I agree with Ryan. "Love means that you're *able* to say you're sorry." If you're human you're going to make mistakes in your human relationships. You're going to mess up in your relationship with Jesus too. We all pray that we won't. We don't want to. But we will.

In just a short time we will be invited to share in Jesus' Last Supper before His crucifixion – The Sacrament of Holy Communion. Before we respond to the invitation to come to the Table, just as we are, we're always given a chance to let God know *we're sorry* when we've missed the mark, when we've fallen short of being that person He wants us to be. Whether it's ourselves or others that we've hurt, in the final analysis we have hurt God. That messes up relationships – not just with God, but also with others. Maybe we have to go to that person we've hurt and ask forgiveness, and maybe we have to forgive ourselves, but when it all breaks down and these relationships are in danger, we need to repair the damage. And we can start today with God.

We are soon going to be offered bread and wine, symbols of Christ's very life, His energy, in a sacrament that celebrates either our connectedness, or provides the opportunity for re-connection. There is no 'disconnect' in what Jesus offers today to each one of us. It's only divine connectedness in a relationship that we can count on forever. Now, and always! Amen

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<sup>i</sup> Wikipedia for "Love Means Never Having to say you're sorry"