

Sermon November 26, 2017 “Placement Tests” John 15:1-8 Matt 24:14-30

Have you ever cleaned a vase when you’ve left the flowers in it too long? When they’ve been there really long, the task is not at all pleasant. The easiest part of the job is pulling out the dead flowers and tossing them, then pouring out the putrid water. The tough part comes when you try to clean the residue out of the vase. It can be a yucky undertaking.

Flowers in a vase have been cut off from their source of life, even if one pours a packet of “life-extension” powder into the vase water. When they’re cut off, they move toward death.

It’s not so different with people. People who are not well-connected to God are dying. Their bodies may not decline any faster than those who are being spiritually nurtured, but they are dying on the inside, in the heart, in the hidden places of the spirit.

Jesus told us, in John 15: “I am the vine. Abide in me...” And he warned that God is the vinedresser who will cut off branches that do not produce fruit and prune branches that do. BOTH kinds of branches come under corrective action by the vinedresser, but those who bear fruit will be pruned and corrected so as to help them produce more fruit.

What does this have to do with MY life, you may ask? Everything! Everything.

Jesus didn’t tell his disciples: “Just believe these five things about me, and you will have life.” Instead, Jesus said, “Follow me, abide in me, live in me.”

Christianity is not a set of beliefs and propositions. It is a matter of decision, of deciding to follow. Faith in Jesus is not beliefs *about* Jesus; it is determination to follow Jesus and to let his way be the guide of your life.

The first letter of John, chapter 4, declares that those who say “I love God” but then fail to live in a loving way are deceitful. And it’s true: the test is not what we *say* about our beliefs and values, but how we live our lives.

William Willimon told of two men he knew. “I know a barber, who, after a long day of cutting people’s hair for money, goes out to a hospital for the mentally ill and cuts hair there for free. A friend of his is an accountant who after a long day of serving people’s financial interests for money goes out at night to cruise local bars, pick up women for one-night stands, and to enjoy himself as much as possible. ... Both men, the barber and the accountant, are apprentices, people attached to some larger vision of what life is about, why we were put here. One is attached to Jesus; the other is attached to American consumerism and selfish hedonism.” (William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*) The difference between these two men: their connection. Do they abide in Christ? Do they let their lives bear fruit to show love to others?

The first Gospel reading we heard this morning, from Matthew 24:14-30, was Jesus’ parable of the Talents. Each man was given a certain amount of money to oversee while the master was

away, but one of them failed to do anything with the amount with which he was entrusted. He blamed his failure on the Master: "I knew you were a harsh man, so I was afraid to lose your money by doing anything with it except burying it to keep it safe."

Perhaps we sometimes find ourselves doing the same thing with our lives. I am afraid, perhaps not of God, but that I may be good enough to use my gifts. I could be laughed at. I might not know what to say if I tried reaching out to someone in a particular circumstance. I might not have enough money if I give some away. Fear can stop our "faith-growth" right in the tracks. It certainly did for that man who buried his talents.

So we each need to give ourselves a "placement test" periodically. That's where we honestly look at ourselves and see whether we are still "on the vine," still trusting God and following the ways of Jesus (love God, love neighbors) enough to receive God's loving strength, or whether we have let our fears and our love of comfort and our resentments cut us off from the Vine that gives us life.

I share a story - apparently a true one - found in the book, *Outflow*, by Steve Sjogren and Dave Ping, about a woman named Rose whose life got reconnected to the Vine in a powerful way. (pp. 204-207) *Steve will never forget how Rose introduced herself on the Sunday morning they met. "Hi, I'm Rose," she said quietly, "...and I'm dying." She explained that she had a serious blood disease that the doctors could do nothing about. She'd been through all kinds of treatments, but now they were giving her three months. With a look of forlorn resignation in her eyes, Rose said that she might make it to her 70th birthday, and then "that will be that."*

Though he's not in the habit of responding this way to folks with terminal illnesses, Steve felt God's Spirit prompting him to speak up in a somewhat audacious way. (Now Steve, in first-person:) "Well, Rose, I am sorry to hear that you're dying, but wouldn't you rather go out with a bang instead of a whimper?" Not surprisingly, Rose did a double-take and with a shocked expression demanded, "What did you just say?"

I repeated myself and continued, "This week a bunch of us are going to deliver about 100 bags of groceries and lots of clothes to single parents in a poor part of town. When we give them food and clothes, we'll offer to pray for them. Don't you think going with us might be a great first step toward going out with a bang?" After a moment of hesitation, Rose agreed to come with us.

A few days later we went out to deliver the items. Rose was quiet and a little reserved. Mostly she watched and helped carry bags while other volunteers knocked on doors and prayed for people. At the end of our deliveries, she remarked to me, "You know, I think I can do this. It is fun, actually. I think I'll come back next week."

Indeed Rose did come back the next week, and the week after that. And it was on the third week when something powerful happened to our dear Rose. I was blessed to be with her when it happened. I was carrying the groceries. Though she was shy and retiring by nature, Rose had not gained enough confidence to engage the strangers we were serving in conversation. At one

of our stops, we were invited into a family's apartment and introduced to "Grandma," a woman who was younger than Rose, but who suffered from diabetes. Grandma's legs were very swollen, and she had not been out of her wheelchair in over 18 months. She had to have major assistance from two adults just to go to the bathroom.

When Rose asked if there was anything we could pray for, Grandma spoke up, saying, "I just want to be able to wiggle my ankles. I haven't been able to move them for almost two years. I'm afraid that I'm going to lose my legs to this disease."

Rose whispered in my ear, "Oh my, this is over my head." But I encouraged her just to pray a simple prayer and let God take it from there. Though Rose looked at me with a pleading look, I said, "I'm sorry, I'm fresh out of prayers this morning – it's up to you. Why don't you just say something like, 'God, make these ankles move, in Jesus' name.'" Rose prayed that prayer.

One minute passed, and Grandma said, "I feel some tingling in my ankles." Rose was surprised but pleased, so she asked if she could pray some more. This time the tingling increased. So Rose prayed a third time with real gusto. This time Grandma not only wiggled her ankles, she was able to move them about four inches up and down! It didn't seem all that great to Rose and me, but Grandma and her family were thrilled!!

Rose's life changed in that moment. She not only became a more devoted participant in our church's outreach, she began praying for people regularly, and started giving out clothing and food two extra days a week. Months passed, then years, then a couple of decades (that's right, I said decades!), and Rose is still going strong. Recently I asked her about her "fatal" disease, and she laughed and told me, "All those doctors are dead and here I am, still plugging away, fit as a fiddle!" We celebrated Rose's 90th birthday recently, and I was asked to say a few words. When I first tried to speak, I broke down, but when I pulled myself together, I finally said, "I'm only 50 now, but when I grow up, I want to be just like Rose!" Everybody cheered because they knew that she lives every day for Jesus and others, not for herself. She has borne incredible fruit in countless lives while defying a medical death sentence in her own. The power of Jesus has been living in her and pouring out through her. Rose's willingness to trust God and begin stepping out in faith are what God's kingdom is all about. (Outflow, Sjogren and Ping, 2006)

A good story, published in 2006. But our stories, our lives, are right here and now, and we also have the choice as to the placement of our trust. Our Lord invites us to remain connected to the Vine, to his life and ways, so that we may find ourselves nourished and able to share life with others. This will give meaning to our days as well as transform our world into fruit-filled, hope-sharing celebration. May it be so, to the honor and glory of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.