

Sermon April 2, 1017 Ezekiel 37:1-14 John 15:1-11 "Life-Giving Connection"

The scriptures we heard today told of God's breath bringing lifeless bones back into vitality and Jesus' warning to his followers that they needed to stay "on the vine," connected to the life-flowing nourishment of the Lord and connected to each other. These images, of bones dancing back to life and of the withering that happens to a branch cut off from the vine, are pretty easy for us to grasp.

But it's harder to let these scriptures and their images so speak to us that we actually let them "life" our lives.

Years ago, when I was pastor of the Grace UMC in Southington, there was a man named Bill who showed up one day and quickly became a vital part of our church family. Bill would come every Saturday morning to our prayer group; he would come during the week lugging loads of groceries for our food pantry; and of course he was there every Sunday. It was a real blessing for Bill that the Southington church did not have even ONE step to climb, because he had a horrible time breathing. Just walking from the parking lot to the office was a huge challenge for him, and when bags of food were added, it seemed to me that he risked his life every time he showed up. After exertion, he would have to lean forward on his arms and try to let his lungs get some air again. For Bill, the oxygen he was able to breathe was life-giving in a profound way. He would joke about how he knew he was connected to God as long as he could still pull in another breath. Before he died, he required more and more oxygen. Whenever I visited him, I found myself deeply concerned that I not step on his oxygen tube by mistake.

For most of us, our ability to breathe is taken for granted. We proceed through our days doing pretty much what we want to do without concern for whether we will make it to our next destination. And unfortunately, we also tend to be just as complacent when it comes to our connection to God. Lots of folks I have known over the years seem as unable to breathe in the breath of God as Bill was to receive oxygen. They are not "connected."

One woman explained her relationship with God: "I was brought up in the church and I attend pretty regularly. I know that God is there, and I pray when somebody I know needs prayer. But basically I see God as my safety net in life. Most of the time, I don't give God all that much thought. But when I am sick or buying a lottery ticket or in some kind of trouble, I find great comfort in knowing that God is with me."

Did you hear all the "I" and "me" stuff in what this woman said? Did you notice that she did not say anything about what *God* might want? She sounded pretty much as though SHE is the director of the relationship between God and her. God is simply to be at her service when she decides she needs something.

If you have a friend, are you the only one who gets to call? Only when YOU want, so that your friend can never initiate or invite you somewhere? If so, this would seem to be missing out on what true friendship is, where either friend can call the other and be listened to and responded to.

Otherwise, there is not that much of a connection or relationship.

Relationship with God is everything. In Ezekiel's day, the people had been defeated by a foreign country. They felt that God had abandoned them; their faith and their hopes were dried up, like dust. There did not seem to be any way for them to have real life again.

So God gave the prophet Ezekiel a vision, a vision of disconnected and dried-up bones receiving the Word and breath of God again. Clattering as they came back together and then restored as muscles and sinews sprung forth on them, the bones lived as the breath of God gave them life and the ability to move and to have meaning again. LIFE. CONNECTION. HOPE! God was with them, even when they could not see it and felt it no longer possible.

To communicate the importance of being in close relationship with God, Jesus used an image that would have been quite familiar to those who heard his words: the grape vine. The image of the vineyard as God's people, and God as the attentive but usually disappointed vineyard owner, is frequently used in the Old Testament. God's disappointment was due to the fact that in spite of all God's nurturing, the vineyard, the people of God, failed to produce good fruit. The people failed to honor God as they refused to show love: as they trampled on the poor and powerless and sought after money and power instead of what was right and just. They turned away from God to worship the gods of their neighbors. They did not love God, so they were fruitless. A fruitless vineyard is worthless.

Jesus took this image, and here, in the 15th chapter of the Gospel of John, changed it around a bit to offer a tremendous promise as well as challenge. The promise: Christ as the true vine will give you life and enable you to produce good fruit if you will let him. The challenge: Apart from God's love as given us in Jesus we will not be able to produce anything worthwhile. Time and again, as I have run here and there, trying to "do ministry" and struggling with all the things I do not have time or energy to do as pastor, the image of the man pedaling a pedal-powered little plane over the English Channel finds a place in my brain. On June 12, 1979, a young man made aviation history when he pedaled his plane 22 miles to land, exhausted, on the coast of France. As dramatic as this feat was, man-powered flight is not practical, for a person simply cannot maintain the necessary energy output for extended flights. It is the same for the Christian life. There is no way we who are trying to follow Jesus Christ can "pedal our own faith." We must be connected to our Source of power, God, through prayer and through being available to let God work through us.

"Abide in me." Some folks think this means: "I've got to keep my mind of Jesus every minute, I've got to read the Bible every day, and give everything I can to the poor, and pray a lot, and give up everything, and try, try, try to be holy....Maybe by all this I'll be able to be a disciple." Perhaps a better way of approaching this is: "I cannot do it on my own, but I will try to do my best knowing that I am not alone. Christ is with me, loving me, forgiving me, and asking me to do the same for others. As I receive blessing, I will seek to share it with someone else. I will also seek to know this One who gives me life...Amazed all the while that whatever I do I do because God is first calling me to get closer to God." I don't have to do it all myself, but I DO

need to do SOMETHING.

Jesus told us straight: Life off the branch becomes death. Any church seeking to exist apart from Jesus will find itself without voice, without message, and without power. It will be barren, little more than an adornment eventually to be cast aside and abandoned. Any individual who tries to be a Christian without letting Christ power him/her will end up feeling like an empty and often angry shell, dried up, lifeless.

We are Christians NOT just to have a “safety net.” We find life *only* as we go about the business of our Lord, Jesus Christ. To seek and save the lost, to proclaim to the world that God loves it, to lift up those who are downtrodden, to seek justice for all and to resist evil however it appears. We are to offer forgiveness when others will not, because we are forgiven by God. THIS is how we can abide in Christ Jesus, and he in us. We can do it because God, who totally knows each of us - the good and the bad - from our very beginning and all the way through and after our death, loves us. This is the life-giving Connection, challenge and hope offered in every breath, and beyond, for you and for me. Thank God!! Amen.