

From the pulpit of North Shore Congregational Church

“Connected”

Rev. Julie Sheridan-Smith – Preaching

1 John 4:7-21 John 15:1-8

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1 John 4:7-21

⁷Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives *in us*, and his love is perfected in us. ¹³By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. ¹⁵God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. ¹⁶So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. ¹⁷Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because *as he is*, so are we in this world. ¹⁸There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹We love because he first loved us. ²⁰Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

John 15:1-8

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide 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. ⁵I 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. ⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

Connected

There is a lot of loving and abiding going on in our two readings this morning. And wouldn’t it be nice if it was as simple as that old Beatles song, “All you need is love, doo ta doodle do.” But instead we look around the world and the news, or maybe even at our personal lives and wonder, where is all that loving and abiding happening anyway?

Sometimes it’s hard to see the *commandment* we just heard...“those who love God *must* love their brothers and sisters also” as something more than a vague but good idea, or as something

we can respond to with - “well it depends on who we are talking about and what they have done.” But it is pretty clear here that with God - no, ifs, ands or buts about it - love *is the deal!*

And we also get a pretty strong statement here that says if you claim that you love God but hate... whoever it is you cannot abide, for whatever reason, then you are lying about loving God. Ouch!

Author Ann Lamott wrote, “You can safely assume you’ve created God in *your own image* when it turns out God hates all the same people you do.”

But there is a term that some of us have encountered from the Tuesday Book Group that I think describes the idea of God’s love. Recently we read a book by Father Greg Boyle called “Tattoos on the Heart.” He writes of the people and experiences he has working with gang members in Los Angeles. And many of us have marveled at his humor as well as an ongoing, non-judgmental approach that he carries into the violence and healing love he encounters, into their lives and deaths, into the deep and mutual friendships, that wrap like tangled vines around them all. And through it all you can tell that Boyle subscribes to – as he puts it, the “no matter whatness of God.” That God loves us no matter what, and that is how I believe God hopes we will love others.

This weekend, Chris Rygh, our speaker for the Wisconsin Congregational Association Summit and Meeting offered a phrase that the churches he serves with in Iowa have embraced as what it means to be Church. It doesn’t matter who you are, what you’ve done, or what has been done to you. You are welcome, you belong, you are loved.

Now the first reading we heard is a beautiful and loving image of God, yet it carries a strong statement of responsibility for us. And I think it expresses the “no matter whatness of God” throughout. But we might hear in the second reading an “or elseness” about God, when we hear about broken branches, withered and thrown away. Bear fruit, or else.

But remember, Jesus says, “Abide in me, *as* I abide in you” and this is God’s plea to live into that “no matter whatness” of God. And I think, as I often do, about that line in The Lord’s Prayer that is *our* plea... “Forgive us our debts *as* we forgive our debtors” for it is in *us* I hear the limited possibility, an “or else ness” in us if we ask God to forgive only as much as we do. And there is the challenge and invitation! That we might grow in our ability to forgive, that we might seek a “no matter whatness” in how we love each other.

Our lives are filled with stories of abiding and bearing fruit or struggling for that connection.

Tangled in the vines of our everyday lives are issues that can have a strangle hold on so many us. We hear the global news and may not know where to turn or how to respond beyond knowing and wishing those particular “branches of the vine” would just be cut off.

Whether you live in the inner city of Milwaukee or suburbs like Fox Point, Whitefish Bay, Mequon or Menomonee Falls, we are all tangled up in the same crisis.

The Opioid Crisis touches so many lives and then there is the recent article in the Milwaukee Journal about the issue of childhood trauma and its relationship with mental illness that is affecting far too many young people and families...really all of us, for it wends its way like a vine through many ongoing social and economic problems.

What might it look like if we decided to say, “It doesn’t matter who you are, what you’ve done or what’s been done to you?” It would mean, we pray and act and love into these crisis, because we ARE the branches clinging to the vine of life that is God.

And there are other stories - simple sweet stories that are clearly tangled in the Vine...

So often, as I prepare for Thursday Bible study or when I have the opportunity to preach I encounter the living gospel in the stories and people I get tangled up with.

Earlier this week some ongoing *and* immediate circumstances left me feeling pretty drained, and sad, even as I read and listened to our readings to prepare for today. And as has happened so often, something about these readings spoke, without those particular words by people and stories that simply came my way.

For instance, I had an unexpected encounter with a woman who I will call Maude. Maude talked about a good friend of hers who has progressed deeply into dementia. She visits this friend three times a week even though, as she said, "my friend isn't there anymore." But they sit together holding hands, Maude holding the hand of a beloved friend and the other holding the hand of a stranger. And sometimes Maude's friend will just relax, resting her head on that stranger's shoulder who will say to her each time, "You know I love you, and even if you don't remember me - I remember you."

And as we talked, Maude wondered why so many of their original group of friends didn't go around to visit. And she didn't say this with judgement for their lack, but out of love for what they were missing. The opportunity to connect, the opportunity to just *be* love for someone, the opportunity to *be* the "no matter whatness" of God.

And I thought, that vine of life called Jesus is wrapped tightly around the branch, and its fruit is beautiful.

There is a South African term or philosophy called Unbuntu which translates as "I am because we are." This sure sounds like the Gospel to me! It sounds like another "I am" statement of Jesus... "I am the vine, you are the branches." And while I do believe that God's existence does not *depend* on us, I also know, that God *chooses* to be God *with* us, and tells us that, "those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."

All you need is love, doo ta doodle do... But oh we struggle to love others with that "no matter what" kind of love. Too often our way of loving the other is based on an "or else ness" that asks the other to be like us first, and then we'll see how we can get along.

Some might wonder - how could "those people" get caught up in Opioids, or some might speculate on statistics that speak of the rise in young suicides and the many layers of mental illness as something that happens somewhere else...and boy "they" better fix that. But the truth is, "those people" might just be us or a family member, or our neighbor. And God loves "those people" in a "no matter what" kind of way.

And meanwhile, some think we cannot come together - because the divide is too great between us and some kind of political, spiritual, social orientation or status. But then we remember, "Those who say, I love God, and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars" ...And that is *not* who *we* are!

I don't know about you, but I have learned a lot throughout my life about the "no matter whatness" of God. I have received grace and forgiveness from friends, family, and strangers -which helps me remember to see God's living presence in everyone I encounter.

Is this so for you? I hope so,

Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Center us now, O God, on your presence that is woven like a vine around us and among us. as we offer our needs, our hungers, our joys and fears.

We want to pray, live, and lean into your “no matter what” kind of love. And so thank you for the joys of the day. We are grateful that you abide in us, that you choose to be God with us... We thank you for the beauty that surrounds us, the warming spring, new life and always new hope...

We pray for those we know, and those we do not know who need your care, and ask that you helps us be people of healing, peace and redemption. We pray for those who need healing of mind, body and spirit... we pray for those who are struggling with addictions, health concerns, anxieties, stress, and losses that squeezes out hope, we pray that we might be your kind of love more and more.

And so we ask that by your Holy Spirit we will be better enabled each day to be your heart and hands...that we may carry your presence into each person and circumstance we meet. Help us to remain connected to you and give glory to you; for we offer our prayers and our lives in Jesus' name, Amen.