



North Shore  
**Congregational  
Church**  
FOX POINT, WI

*From the Pulpit...*

## ***“Intentional Faith”***

**Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching**

*Deuteronomy 30: 11-20; John 15: 1-11*

*February 16, 2020*

As I was reviewing some of the suggested text in this week’s lectionary, for this morning, I came across that passage from Deuteronomy 30, and I was immediately reminded of a story that dates back about ten years, or so. I was serving a church in Michigan, and I headed out of the church office and towards a visit with a member at a local hospital. I checked the info of where she was, got in my car, and started heading out. Twenty-five minutes later I arrived at the hospital, parked, and walked up to the reception desk to get her room number. That’s when the challenge arose – the receptionist couldn’t find her. I double-checked my phone – it was only a few hours earlier that they told me she would be there for a few days – so asked him to check again. No luck. ‘Are you sure you’re in the right place?’ He asked. ‘I’m sure. Can you check again?’ We go through the spelling of her name, he goes through the computer – we spend 5 minutes trying to track her down. ‘I’m not sure what’s going on,’ I said, ‘they just texted me two hours ago that she’s here at Crittendon.’ A stunned look overtakes his face as he, with every bit of compassion he can muster, turns to me and says, ‘This is Beaumont.’

Now, profound embarrassment of the moment aside, the one thing that give me solace in the face of going to the wrong hospital when I had visited both dozens of times before, is that I know I’m not alone. We all do it! We all have those moments in which we suddenly find ourselves awakening from some mindless stupor and realize that we were completely absent from what was going on. We all succumb to those moments of intellectual detachment in which we are plotting along as we always have and always do, but in truth our minds are wholly disengaged from that which we are doing. It is our own human auto-pilot.

- We read a book for half an hour, and suddenly realize we don’t have a clue what we read on the last ten pages.
- We drive down the road that we travel every day to work, and it hits us, “I know I drove those last two miles, but I don’t remember it!”
- We engage in a conversation with a friend, a co-worker, or perhaps even a spouse (not that I would ever do it), and even if we thought we were paying attention, we’ll discover those moments in which we have no idea what has been said over the last five minutes.

We do it at work, we do it in relationships, we succumb to it in most every arena of our lives at one point or another. While, perhaps not all of you go as far as to meet the kind of

embarrassment I did in that moment, we all have those times (sometimes frequently), that the auto-pilot turns on and our minds turn off. We all have those moments and places in which we function and participate with all but no mental involvement in what is happening. But, I'm honestly not sure there is anywhere in which we do it more frequently, or more naturally, than we do in our lives of faith.

The reality is that the auto-pilot phenomenon, in most areas of our lives, is a relatively rare and isolated event. While I suggest we all have those moments of intellectual disengagement in which we allow our bodies to simply follow their routines without a whole lot of investment on the part of our minds – that's not how we live the majority of our every day. My faulted venture into that hospital was a first-time experience for me, and after that experience, it most certainly is not something I have repeated! In life, auto-pilot is the exception – the rare occurrence. In faith, however, it is all too often is the norm.

The truth is that, when it comes to our relationships with God, we all too frequently run just about everything on auto-pilot.

- We come to worship on Sunday morning and make our way into the sanctuary where we proceed to sing songs we know like the back of our hands, spend half the sermon writing our grocery list in our heads, and do everything we can to fight off the urge to fall asleep during that ridiculously long prayer the preacher insists on giving each Sunday. But, we went to church – and that's what's important.
- We sit down at our tables for dinner, or with our kids at bedtime, and we programmatically say the prayers that we say every day (often the same ones we rehearsed and learned when we were kids). But, we say our prayers – and that's what's important.
- We go to Board meetings, attend church programs, work on projects, and write our checks, and often do much of it out of a sense of obligation and duty. But we do our part – and that's what's important.

But, here's the problem – that's not what's important!

- Going to worship on Sunday morning because that's what 'Good Christians' do is not what's important.
- Saying prayers at rehearsed and scheduled events, because we know we're 'supposed' to pray, is not what's important.
- Participating, giving and serving, because it is our role and responsibility in uplifting the institution, is not what's important.

And, that is what brings us to our passages that we shared a short while ago. These words from Deuteronomy, and the vine imagery of Jesus that we get in the Gospel According to John, reflect, very clearly, the fundamental necessity of intentionality in faith. Because they show for us, without question, that auto-pilot simply doesn't cut it in our relationship with God.

I've always found the vine imagery that we get from Jesus fascinating. "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower." Jesus says. "<sup>4</sup> Abide in me, as I abide in you...<sup>5</sup>I am the vine; you are the branches." You see, in this passage Jesus is actually reclaiming imagery that has centuries of history for the people of Israel. Hundreds of years earlier, the prophets and the

psalmists had claimed the analogy of the vine to speak to the identity of the people of Israel. God was vine-grower, and the Jewish people the vine – this was not a new image for these people. Jesus reclaims it here, however, to say that God is the vine-grower, but that he himself has become the vine and that the people of God are the branches of that vine.

So, what Jesus is doing in this passage is reclaiming and redefining that image of the vine to help people understand the inherent intertwining of all of those pieces. The vine-grower, the vine, the branches of the vine – none of them has a purpose without the others. “Abide in me,” he says – because, none of it works if we don’t. But that, I suggest, is the fascinating part of this passage. Jesus goes on, after naming the essential interweaving of God, Jesus, and the people of God, to bring in some classic (if I’m remembering my middle school grammar correctly) ‘conditional clauses.’ Jesus opens this passage by reclaiming that image of the vine so that it reflects the necessary relationship between God, Jesus, and us. But, then Jesus goes on to make unequivocally clear that we have a role in that relationship.

- “Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”
- “Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers.”
- “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”
- “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love.”

It’s clear, among other things, that what Jesus is doing in this passage is expressing the reality that we have a role in this relationship. Jesus reclaims that vine imagery to help us understand that God, and Jesus, and we, all need to be connected to grow and to flourish. But, then Jesus goes on to use these conditional statements, these if/then qualifiers, in order to make fundamentally clear that we have to make a choice in the matter. We have to choose to abide in him. We have to choose to follow his commands. We have to choose to love to him. If we want to bear fruit, if we want to know the strength of the vine in our lives, if we want to know the wonder of being molded and shaped by God in our lives – we have to make the decision to be a part of that relationship. If we want to know the glory of living in the vine, under the care of the vine-grower – we have to choose to do that. There is an essential intentionality to faith.

I’m not sure there is anywhere in all of Scripture in which it is laid out more clearly than it is by the Deuteronomist. We’ve explored this passage before. “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. 16 If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess... 19 I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life...”

We have a choice in this! Faith is a choice! Living in God is a choice! Holding to the love of Jesus is a choice! We are not pawns in some celestial chess match, and we are not robots marching through the duties of faith in order to fulfill our obligations. We are essential and interconnected members of the vine who can be fed and strengthened by our Savior as we are shaped and guided by our Creator. But, if want to be in that relationship – if we want to know

what it means to truly remain in the vine that is Jesus Christ – we have to start with a fundamental understanding that auto-pilot simply isn't good enough. We have to be intentional about it – we have to choose to live the life that God is offering!

We all tend to succumb to that state of mindless living in auto-pilot now and then – and that's ok. Because, eventually, someone's gonna look up at us and say, "You're in the wrong hospital." But, all too often, we find ourselves doing the same in our faith. We attend because that's what Good Christians do, or we pray because we're supposed to do, or we serve because that's our duty... All the while, we miss the wisdom that comes from the image of vine and the stark words of the Deuteronomist – Faith is a choice. Faith is a choice to remain in the vine, every day, every hour, every moment – allowing the strength of the vine to carry us and the love of the vine-grower to shape us. Faith is a choice. Faith is a choice to live intentionally in the vine – to seek him in prayer, to worship him with full heart and to serve him with commitment and care. Faith is a choice...every day, every moment...faith is a choice to live in the vine who offers us life beyond compare. Auto-pilot may take over our lives from now to then, and that's OK. But faith is a choice and the Deuteronomist implores us...choose life!