

The Vine
John 15: 1-8

I've been told it's rude to have a private conversation with someone in front of other people, so here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to talk *mostly* to the confirmands this morning, but I'll invite everyone else to listen in. Then it will only be a semi-private conversation and I've gone out of my way to make sure no one feels excluded. And besides, maybe there will be a word from God in it for the rest of us.

Guys, you have spent this whole school year thinking about what you believe, and yes, what you are still struggling to believe and understand. With your mentors alongside you, you've studied, considered, wrestled, and pondered for nine long months. And now you've come to the point where you are ready to stand before the congregation and make a public profession, not just of your faith, your beliefs, but of your intention to be disciples of Jesus. You're here today to declare to this congregation that you will dedicate yourself to being a follower of Jesus.

That's what we've tried to make this confirmation process all about in the past few years –making disciples, not just cramming lots of facts in your head about being Presbyterian, and making sure you understand the difference between consubstantiation and transubstantiation.

Before you take the plunge, though, there's one more thing you really ought to understand about what you are doing. You aren't just committing yourself to Jesus. You are committing yourself to the Church, too. By presenting yourselves to be confirmed you are declaring your intention to be a disciple, but what you need to know is that there are no "free range" disciples. There is no such thing as an independent Christian. If you are a Christian, a disciple, you are a part of a church.

Says who? John, for one. I got a kick out of one guy's translation of this passage from the Greek – I grew up hearing "thees" and "thou's" in the Bible, but his translation was full of "y'all's." Everywhere there was a "you", he put in the word "y'all", as in "Y'all are the branches," and "if y'all abide in me, ask for whatever y'all wish and it will be done." Why did he do that? Because all those "you's" are plural. He isn't writing to individuals and telling them how to be good Christians. He's writing to a community, and telling them how to be the Church. Actually, he's telling them that to be good Christians they have to be a good Church. They are tied up together. Like a vine, where all of the branches are all tangled up together, all wrapped around each other. There's no way of untwisting and untangling them so they are a bunch of individual sticks, separate and distinct from one another.

Before they get into the all tangled-up-together part, though, they need to remember that the thing a couple of things about vines. The first is that those branches didn't just grow up out of the ground, like the branches of the forsythia in my backyard do. Only the vine itself comes up out of the ground – all of the branches grow off of it. Without that vine they can't survive. The word John uses – over and over and over again, so you can tell

that it is important – is “abide.” The branches (that’s us) have to “abide” in the vine (that’s Jesus). What that means is that we have to root ourselves in God’s love. That’s our anchor. Our source of life and strength. The single most important thing you can know about yourself is that God loves you. Thinking of yourself as God’s beloved (another word John uses a lot) is more important than thinking of yourself as an athlete, or an actor, or a good student, or a funny person, or a doctor, or a teacher, or a bus driver. ‘Cause you might not always be those things. You might get hurt and not be able to run or throw a ball anymore –then what are you? Or maybe you go off to college and find someone who is actually smarter than you are – then what? Or you’ll quit working some day and you won’t be a teacher or a doctor or a plumber anymore. Then who are you? You’re God’s beloved, and that’s more important than any of those other things. It’s the one thing about you that will never change and can never be taken away.

The other thing to remember about vines is why they exist. In Jesus’ world, at least, when you talked about vines you were talking about grapevines, and the only reason they existed was to bear fruit. They weren’t for decoration, to grow pretty flowers. They were there to produce fruit. And guess what that fruit is? If you leave John and prowl around in Paul’s letters he talks about all kinds of things as being the fruit of our relationship with God – patience, joy, that kind of thing. But in John it’s only one thing: love. Look back a couple of chapters. He’s just washed the disciples’ feet and told them to do the same sorts of things for each other, and he’s just given them a new commandment: to love each other in the same way that God loves us; to look after each other’s interests and needs, the same way Jesus did for us. He tells them that it is by following this new commandment that people will know that they are disciples.

What he’s really saying to us is that being a Christian, being a disciple, is to be a part of a really big family, isn’t it? And if you are a part of a family then you live your life a lot differently, don’t you? I saw on the news this week about this young, single guy who just got the world’s best job – he’ll spend six months on an island on Australia’s Great Barrier Reef just hanging out, swimming, snorkeling, sailing and blogging about what a great place it is. He can do whatever he wants, eat what he wants whenever he wants, wear what he wants. His life is his own there. But if you are in a family, you don’t live like that, do you? When you are in a family you think about what’s good for the family, not just what’s good for you. You think about what the others want, what they like, what’s good for all of us. There’s no longer just a ‘me’ if I’m in a family. It’s ‘us’ now.

On the other hand, when we are in a family sometimes we’re going to voluntarily do something we aren’t wild about simply because we know it is important to someone else. It’s not our thing; our cup of tea, but because we love you and know it’s important to you, we’ll go along. It’s not your thing, but because you can see how important it is to the others, you go along. That’s what people do when they love each other. Last night I turned the TV on in the middle of the movie *Family Man*, with Nicholas Cage and Tea Leoni. It’s really kind of a confusing movie if you don’t start from the beginning, but in one scene he’s just tried to convince her that they should uproot their family from their small town life and move to New York City so he can take a job with a high-powered law firm. She’s not happy about it. At all. But then she comes back later and says to him

that if it is really important, if he really needs to take that job, then she will take their kids away from the life they love, and she'll leave her work and they will go, because she loves him, and she chooses him over her job and her house. That's what we do in this family we call the Church, or what we strive for, at least. Choosing each other over things and issues.

The other thing about being in families where there is a lot of love is that their doors are always open. There is always love enough for someone else. We can be tight-knit without being closed. When I was in college I was sort of adopted by a family in my church. They had five children of their own, and no good reason at all to add to their brood that I could see. They didn't need me. I didn't add anything to their family. But their doors were always open to me. Holidays, Sunday lunch (this was in Washington State, so they didn't call it dinner there), countless hours during the week. They let me do laundry there, cook, just hang out with them. The first time I saw cable TV was at their house. And MTV. The final episode of MASH. But what I will remember most is that they loved me.

They bore fruit. They were loved by God, they loved each other, and then they reached out, outside their own walls and family to people like me who needed to be loved; a place to call home. That's what the church does. Like a vine, it just keeps reaching out, stretching, further and further. Bringing people in, or just loving them and caring for them where they are. We aren't here for decoration, or to be an exclusive club. We're here to pass on the love that God has shown us. We're here to bear fruit.

You've been working toward this day for nine long months now, but I hope you see that this isn't the end of a journey, it's just the beginning. In just a minute I'm going to invite you to come up here to be confirmed by the Church, but what we are really doing is welcoming you as a full-fledged part of the family. We are welcoming you to the vine. Come, abide and bear fruit with us.