

BEAUTIFUL FRIENDSHIPS

John 15:1-8

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I spent a couple of days last week with my good friend Rhoda, who is an Episcopal priest in Texas. Rhoda was diagnosed with cancer eight weeks ago. We've been keeping in touch through text messages and Facebook, but there are times when you just want to see someone in the flesh. We needed to hug each other. I needed to see her face. We needed time for long, uninterrupted conversations.

One of the occupational hazards of ministry is that you start to view every experience in your life as a sermon illustration. It's hard for me to read a novel or watch a movie without thinking, "How can I use this in a sermon?" (And --case in point--here I am, using my trip last week as a sermon illustration!) Rhoda said to me, about a month ago, "I feel like I should be writing about my journey through cancer." Because, of course, there are people who have done just that. One minister in the United Church of Christ wrote a blog during the time she had cancer. It became very popular, and she has now recovered, but has written more, and she will be one of the main speakers at the General Synod meeting this summer. Her cancer journey proved to be good for her career, though I'm sure that wasn't her intent.

And last week, when Rhoda and I were together, someone suggested it to her again. "You're such a good writer; you should write about this." She said to me, "I don't feel like writing when I'm sitting in the chair getting chemo. I don't really want to write about cancer. What I feel like doing is distracting myself with TV and magazines." And

I said to her, “Maybe all you need to do is get through this, and not pressure yourself into doing more.”

But I know what she’s talking about. In our profession, we compare ourselves to others. There’s always someone who’s preaching better sermons, writing books, producing creative programs and promoting them on flashy websites.

But that doesn’t just happen in ministry. It happens in life. Most people I know compare themselves to others. We notice the people who are outperforming us, or who appear to have it more together. We look at them and think, “Why aren’t I skinnier, richer, more successful?” “What am I doing wrong?” It’s an exhausting way to live, and while one could argue that a certain competitive spirit brings out our best, comparing ourselves to others usually doesn’t help us become the people God has created us to be.

It’s as if we think we have to earn God’s approval. We live as if we think we need to do something to deserve friendship and love from one another. It’s an exhausting way to live, like being on a treadmill that will never stop, never reach completion.

To use the imagery from our scripture today, we human beings sometimes think that if we are like a living growing plant, we are responsible for planting ourselves, for finding the best soil, and somehow working our way into that soil all by ourselves, hoping for water and fertilizer so that somehow our lives will take root. Imagine a plant trying to plant itself - isn’t that an utterly ridiculous laughable image? Yet isn’t that sometimes the way we live? Fiercely independent, wanting to rely on no one else?

If you have ever felt that way, then this message today may feel like good news. Jesus says, “I am the vine. You are the branches.” We are not responsible for planting

ourselves. We are not completely independent. If we are disciples of Jesus, our roots are connected to him, to that way of life he has shown us. He is already deeply planted in the soil of God's love. Our job is to be a branch. Branches receive their food, their nutrients, from the vine. Our job is stay connected to the vine, and then to stay connected to the other branches.

Today our vine, if you will, is growing, as more branches are grafted on in the form of new members joining this church. And our vine is growing as more branches are connected to each other. I strongly urge each of you to attend coffee hour this morning and see the kinds of connections you can make with those who may share similar interests. And if you don't see something that interests you, let me know and I will help you connect to others. It is my deepest hope that each member of this congregation develops relationships with others, relationships that will nourish you. Many people in this church spend time together doing odd jobs, or playing cards - and the relationships may seem superficial on the outside, but when you need something deeper, you will have people to turn to. These friendships forged in the church can become beautiful friendships, ones that sustain us in the most difficult times.

We are not here because we all agree on social or cultural issues. We don't all vote the same way. That is not what brings us together. What brings us together is that we all trace our spiritual heritage to the same root, the vine that is Jesus, the soil that is God's love. That is what we have in common. And when we are at our best, we create a community of mutual support and encouragement, and in that community we each can discover God's purpose for our lives and live that out in service to others. So we

are not a vine that looks inward, that only takes care of our own branches. We are constantly open, to the light, to the wind, and towards growth.

We live in a deeply broken world, a world as fractured as it has ever been. Globally, we see that the divides between ethnicities and religions have created a culture where terrorism is rampant. In this country, we see that the divides between class and race have created a culture where violence is growing.

What if we, as the church, were a place where people who have differences find common ground? What if we practiced civil discourse, learning from one another, listening to each other's stories, realizing that the differences between us don't have to separate us? Could we then become seeds of hope, scattered throughout our schools, neighborhoods and workplaces?

I am so grateful that I don't have to try to be the vine. When I am spiritually exhausted, I need to remind myself to go to the source, to drink deeply of the water that refreshes, to fill myself with the life-giving spirit, to be nurtured by prayer and meditation and communion, to spend time with the other branches, laughing together, studying together, crying together, working together.

We need each other, because life is hard, and we need each other because the world needs an example of unity in the midst of diversity, of respect that transcends differences; the world needs an example of a healthy thriving plant, producing fruit not just for itself but for others who are hungry, for food, for hope, and for friendship.