

5 Easter

May 3, 2015

Rev. Ken Wratten at St. Stephen's, San Jose

Acts 8:26-40 Philip was led to witness to the Ethiopian eunuch

1 John 4:7-21 God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God.

John 15:1-8 Jesus is the vine; God is the vine-grower; we are the branches. Those who abide in Jesus bear much fruit.

Last week we had the delight of hearing Canon Brian Nordwick speak to us about the function of the Great Shepherd to care for the sheep; and for the sheep to learn their shepherd's voice. He challenged you and me to think about our own role as shepherds for other people.

In today's lessons, our Scriptures continue the discussion about our responsibility as Christians; or maybe a better way to phrase it, is that we are being guided how our new covenant relationship with God should change our perspective on RELATIONSHIPS. In the craziness of our over-scheduled lives, it is pretty normal for us to default to letting relationships develop – or not, by circumstance. EXAMPLES: My college roommate Kirke –we squeezed 30 years into 2 months.

But God's plan for relationships is not like that. The apostle John wrote that God is love, and that God demonstrated his love by taking the amazing step of sending his Son into the world so that we could live in relationship with him. Everyone believes that love is important. But it is usually thought of as a feeling. Actually, that isn't real love. Real, enduring, meaningful love is a choice – a decision; and love is an action.

One of the most beautiful passages in Scripture is the 'love chapter' in 1 Corinthians 13. Listen to the description Paul makes of true love:

⁴Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

These qualities of love take work; they require that we make choices. In the same way that God's love for us always involves a choice and an action, our love should do the same; involving choice and action.

The reason this is so important is that it completely defines the quality of the relationship we have with other people, and the quality of the relationship we have with God. Jesus related this concept to the relationship that a vine-grower has to the vine, and the vine has to its branches. When Jesus describes himself as the vine, he is not only defining himself, but he is defining the relationship that exists among God, Jesus, and us. All three elements: the gardener, the vine, and the branches are all needed for the production of fruit: a symbiotic relationship.

Jesus makes the point pretty graphically, in order to show us the importance of it; that we are not tied to Jesus just to sit there with our shiny leaves, soaking up the sun, and absorbing nutrients from the vine. We are here to produce fruit.

I cannot help but relate this very important idea to Friday's service for Bill Bianco. We held his funeral service in Willow Glen because MarieRose believed that there would be too many people attending to fit in our space. She was right. A little under 400 people came to the service, from

around the country. A former business partner told the story about a decision he wanted to have Bill agree to; he wanted to dismiss an unproductive manager, and replace him with a very qualified person who would do a much better job. Bill said to him; “Okay, hire him. But give our manager an equal position so no one sees it as a demotion, and do not cut his pay. I didn’t create this company to throw people away.” I have never experienced that kind of honoring of a relationship in my corporate experience.

Here is another example. For most of the calendar year we have a Tuesday Bible Study. The morning group is a group of ladies who have become very close friends. I love that they meet here because they come prepared with all sorts of baked goods to share with each other. They go to a lot of work to treat each other. When members of the group have become ill, and when some have even ended up in the hospital, they are the first ones to pay a visit to their friend. They are the most effective pastoral care group I have ever seen. What a strong pastoral care team they are!

Here is the point. God is not only interested in our worship of Him. God wants us to make the choices, and take the actions, that result in quality relationships with each other, and quality relationships with God. That requires conscious decisions and doing work on our relationships; NOT just letting them take a course that is defined by chance.

Jesus has given us his Spirit, who in turn gives us the God-incidents that open up opportunities to even love the people we think are un-lovable. The Spirit nudges us to do more than think nicely of people, but to show our love for God by doing loving things for people who desperately need to realize that someone else cares. This is also about deepening the relationships with people we already care about, but do not INVEST ourselves in the relationships because we don’t think we have the time.

So do a self-check on the condition of your vine-branch. Check on the quality of the fruit you yield. Remember that the purpose of your relationships is not to claim the relationship, but to use the relationship to bear fruit that pleases God; and that fulfills you, and makes you a partner in God’s plan for the world.

Amen.