

## **A COMMUNITY ROOTED IN CHRIST**

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When I was much younger, one of the questions that always seemed likely to spark both thought and conversation was, “Can one be a Christian and a hermit?” What was really being asked was, “Can one be a Christian without being part of a larger community?” “Can one be a Christian without being part of the church?” On the one hand, we could say that, as individuals, we must know, confess, and take responsibility for what we believe. In this country we take great pride in and put great emphasis on individual freedom. That is embedded in the First Amendment to the Bill of Rights.

On the other hand, we have this passage from John’s Gospel in which Jesus uses the image of the grapevine and the branches that shoot out from the vine and depend on the vine for its sustenance. The branches of the vine not only depend on the source for its strength and its ability to bear fruit, but the branches intertwine with each other, making it difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish one branch from another. The apostle Paul uses a different image to describe the community of faith, namely, the body and how, while each part of the body may be different, each part is essential to the functioning and well-being of the whole body. And as Jesus Christ is the head of the body, so also in today’s text Jesus is the vine, or the source of life for the branches.

One of the joys of worship is watching the young people here. Not only is there a place for them, but it is here that they learn the life of discipleship. Where else would they learn the Gloria Patri, the Doxology, the Lord’s Prayer, the expression of the gospel

through music? Where else are we all reminded of who we are, what we believe, and the mystery of God's grace and love? Where else do we learn of the story, as the old hymn goes, "of Jesus and his love"? Where else do persons of all ages rub shoulders with each other, greet one another as fellow branches, all of whom are related to the vine, drawing strength from each other as well as from the vine itself?

Recently, I've taken an interest in George Herbert. Herbert lived just shy of 40 years, from April of 1593 to March of 1633. He was English, growing up near Wales. He was a poet and served for a brief time in Parliament. Always feeling led to serve the church, he was not ordained an Anglican priest until 1629 when he was 36 years old. In addition to his remarkable poetry, which had significant influence on some 20th century poets and persons of faith, one of Herbert's contributions was the importance he placed on the role of public worship – not only in the spiritual formation of persons, but in the full expression of the gospel in and to the world. Unlike others who emphasized individual piety and personal devotion, Herbert, who had his own daily practice of private devotions, believed that those practices were subordinate to the corporate worship life of God's people.

Clearly, Herbert had an idealized view of the church. In our day many seem to focus on the church's flaws and what's wrong with the church rather than what's right with the church. The church can get caught up with itself, focusing on its own rules and regulations rather than being an instrument of God's love, grace, and peace. But at its best the church focuses less on itself and more on that one who is the vine, the source of the church's being. Gail O'Day, a New Testament scholar, has written that "the mark of the faithful community is how it loves, not who are its members. There is only one gift,

to bear fruit, and any branch can do that if it remains with Jesus.” O’Day also maintains that “there are no free-standing individuals in community, but branches who encircle one another completely” (*The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. IX, p. 761, 760).

But Jesus goes beyond comparing the community of faith to being the branches that depend on him for their sustenance, growth, and ability to bear fruit. Just as the branches are part of the vine and part of each other, so also does he say that we are to “abide” in him. The Greek word that is translated “abide” (meno) can also be translated “dwell” or “endure”. “Those who abide (or dwell) in me and I in them bear much fruit,” Jesus says. And what does it mean to abide or dwell in Jesus? “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide (or dwell) in my love” (John 15:5b, 9).

We Presbyterians pride ourselves in doing things decently and in order, as Paul charges the Corinthian church to do them (I Cor. 14:40). And there’s an important place for the way things are organized and done. I must confess that at times I have followed that advice perhaps too diligently, perhaps placing too much importance on church polity, believing that the reasons for doing things “decently and in order” were paramount. The longer I live, however, the more I begin to realize that at times I may have been a legalist without having my point-of-view couched in the love of Christ. There are important reasons – even theological ones – for the way we do things in the Presbyterian Church, but if they are not based on and filled with a sense of God’s grace and love, then, as Paul says elsewhere in his letter to the Corinthians, we are little more than “a noisy gong or clanging cymbal” (I Cor. 13:1b).

In the spring of 1935 Dietrich Bonhoeffer went to a small town on the Baltic Sea by the name of Finkenwalde to lead an illegal, underground seminary. Two years later,

in August of 1937, it was shut down by the Nazis. Shortly thereafter Bonhoeffer wrote a little book called *Life Together* in which he reflects on that experience and what it means to be in Christian community. In that book Bonhoeffer writes: “The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer. Longingly the imprisoned apostle Paul calls ‘his dearly beloved son in the faith’, Timothy to come to him in prison in the last days of his life.... Remembering the congregation in Thessalonica, Paul prays ‘night and day...exceedingly that we might see your face’ (I Thess. 3.10)” (pp. 8-9).

Bonhoeffer goes on to write, “Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this. Whether it be a brief, single encounter or the daily fellowship of years, Christian community is only this. We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ” (p. 10).

“I am the vine, you are the branches,” Jesus said. “Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.... As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.” Apart from Jesus we can do nothing, but but being a part of each other can only mean that we are the church when Christ is in our midst. It is no small matter to remember that the last two years of Bonhoeffer’s life were spent in prison, and, two years almost to the day of his arrest, on April 9, 1945 he was hung at the Flossenbürg concentration camp. The physical loneliness he must have experienced as a prisoner was assuaged by the reminder that he was part of a larger Christian community known as the church whose head, the risen Christ, bound that community together. Even on the day of his death, however, he led a worship service with and for his fellow prisoners. Even then, he recognized the

importance of the church.

The same is true for us, whether we are gathered together as a worshipping community or we are physically separated by miles or, psychologically, by differing points-of-view. The love of God that binds us together is greater than anything that can separate us. Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches that depend on him for life and for sustenance and growth. In the closing verse of this passage he reminds us that the result of this belonging together is one of joy: “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete” (15:11). And that is good news. Who would want to be a hermit when that kind of joy is possible?

Thanks be to God!