

# A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A. R. Cole

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Fifth Sunday of Easter



29 April 2018

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Acts 8:26-40  
1 John 4:7-21  
John 15:1-8  
Psalm 22:24-30

I heard a lovely story the other night about how one of the City of London Guild's The Fruiterers have a practice of planting fruit trees all round the world. One came to Washington and asked to plant one somewhere prominent. It was felt that planting a British tree in the White House Garden would not be appropriate. I can understand that. We did burn it down once and it's not surprising that people remain a little sore about that! Mount Vernon too was not very keen for similar historical reasons I think. But it so happened that George Washington had an orchard there and the Trust were looking at restoring it. It turns out that the trees Washington planted were all from Britain (as of course were most of the people I suppose!) and The Fruiterer from London was able to say that they had gene banks where all the strands of English fruit tree ever planted are preserved. So they were able to bring grafts from England with the exactly the same variety of trees as those that Washington planted.

I think there's something very lovely about that. Despite the passage of the ages, war, and revolution it is still possible to graft friendship and peace into the present moment.

*Ye banks and braes o' bonnie Doon  
How ye can bloom so fresh and fair  
How can ye chant ye little birds  
And I see weary fu' o' care*

Robert Burns writes lamenting a lost love in this sad little poem but the sentiment could refer to any grief or loss. We look at the world, even the most pleasant and familiar sights we know, and we feel fundamentally disconnected from them. How can the flowers bloom and the birds sing when our internal world has been made so bleak and bare?

Not only loss creates this disconnection in us, but the pressure of life, work, and circumstances. New to a city and not knowing anyone can all leave us internally distanced from what is around us, both places and people. Social media appears to connect us but in some ways it actively disconnects us. The lives and happy photos of people we vaguely or even intimately know pass

before our eyes like distant mirages. They can seem more real than our less vivid everyday lives feel.

The alienation and disconnection is very much a theme of our current age and part of all our experiences to some degree. T. S. Eliot famously captured it in *The Wasteland*, didn't he?

*“Unreal City,  
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,  
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
I had not thought death had undone so many.  
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,  
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.  
Flowed up the hill and down King William Street.”*

Disconnection is not loneliness as such. It is feeling like a stranger, an alien, and in a place where you know you should feel that you belong.

Connection, the opposite, is a great deal of what the Church is actually about. Everything we do here at Christ Church, from worship, mission, fellowship to service are all about connecting us with God, with each other, and with the community around us.

It is ironic that, as Dean Markham pointed out last Sunday in the forum, just as American society has shrunk back from community and connection. The church is all about finding just these things that has been in decline. More than ever, what the church offers is precisely what is needed and society realizes it less and less. Well not quite so because many people are coming to realize it again. Most of the new people flowing into the life of this congregation are looking for exactly these things.

On a wider scale too, we also need connection with our past. One of the very impressive things about American society, for me, is just how knowledgeable so many of you are about where you've come from. It is, I think, significant that so many young people are involved with these historical societies like the Colonial Wars and the Daughters of the American Revolution. Americans do seem to know if their ancestors came to Jamestown, across on the Mayflower, or whether they fought in the Colonial or Revolutionary wars.

In terms of the church and the faith, our connectedness with the apostles and Christ is vividly symbolized in the institution of Episcopacy. Bishops. On May 12<sup>th</sup>, eight more members of this congregation will have hands laid on them by a bishop to confirm or receive them in the life of the church. Those hands are symbols of the hands of Christ and his apostles who laid their hands on the first leadership of the church 2000 years ago. It is called “apostolic succession”. Sime to

the succession of kings is the succession of *laying on of hands*—broken at times in some places but always repaired and restored. This connects us to the most important royal line of all, the royal line of Christ. Each one of us has been touched, many hands removed its true, but touched indirectly but physically by the apostles and Jesus himself.

As we prepare to celebrate the second of our major bicentennial event, we are a particularly conscious of the connections begun. In that same Royal line of Christ, here in Georgetown 200 years ago and that continue today. *“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser.... I am the vine, you are the branches.”* says Jesus. This is a wonderful and beautiful image, isn't it? but like many of Christ's images it is double edged. The healthy branch that draws life, sap, and vigor from the vine. It consequently bears rich and heavy fruit is a wonderful description of what a life connected to Christ and God can be like. I see that fruit all around here in this congregation.

The withered vine, however, the dried up and fruitless branch that dies through lack of connection to the vine is also a powerful description of what a life that is disconnected from God can be like. Alienated and isolated we become dry sticks and our hearts beat cold and slow. The 20th century was an example of the unbelievable horror that can arise when a cold, dead, and heartless atheism takes hold of the zeitgeist of a society. Tens of millions who died under the twin godless creeds of Nazism and Communism are dark witnesses to what can happen when the human branch becomes disconnected from the divine vine. As western society secularizes, the most worrying aspect is what we may become. Filled with emptiness, loneliness, alienation, and rage people can opt for ideologies that have no connection with the spiritual truth.

The worst extremes of this is seen in some of the mass killings we have seen recently. Young men embrace nihilism and despair to vent their hatred of being and life itself on the defenseless and innocent. And, of course, unhealthy cold, legalistic, or formalistic religious belief can be almost as destructive as a cold godless materialism can be. Historically it hasn't been but it could be. Jesus is clearly thinking about the Jewish people and particularly some of the religious authorities of his time. There are wholesome religion and there are unwholesome religion. Atheism is just one of later— a secular faith but a faith none the less.

It is very easy for us all to become disconnected. Even those of us immersed in a loving faithful and inspirational community of faith such as this one. That is why retreats, prayer time, and bible study are so important. It's not because they are holy past times, though they are, it is fundamentally because it is through these things that we nurture and care for the essential connection with God that we need— just as a branch needs the vine. This connection with God mysteriously affects our connection with other people and with wider society. As Saint John says in the Epistle this morning, love of one another. This essential relationship is absolutely bound up with a relationship with God.

*“We love, because he first loved us. If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also.”*

If you want to know the limitations of your love of God then just think of the people you do not love. The people you disparage, dismiss, and, if not hate, profoundly dislike. The more we love God the more we are able to love our fellow human beings— even the less lovable of them.

So, the challenge of this morning’s readings is clear, I think. Where are you in relation to the vine? Are you connected or disconnected? Do you know the life, purpose, and love of God flowing in you and your life? Do you feel disconnected, cold, and alienated from God, neighbor, and the world around you?

Well, if you do feel disconnected— if you hear the birds sing and see the blossoms of spring and feel nothing. The good news is that the vine is still there and God the great Vinedresser longs to graft us back into the vine of life. All it takes is for us to seek it. To do something to serve. To serve God in worship. To serve our fellow parishioners in fellowship and care. To serve others through mission and outreach to those who need it. That is how the unreal city becomes real. How the images on Facebook grow dim before the real vibrant faces of the people in front of us and how grief, loss or loneliness can be healed and changed into deeper connection.

We can be grafted in to the vine of God again and. Like The Fruitier, we can take part in God’s work in the world by planting the fruit trees of Christ in the lives of all those we meet.



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