

In the Habit of Connecting

John 15:1-8

Jeff Marian

Most of you have already done something amazing today. You walked. Whether it was just to the refrigerator or maybe a long walk for exercise, you did something that at one point in your life was extremely difficult. You probably don't remember just how hard it was, so let me remind you. Let's watch this. [video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SeSG8BkYry8>]

There was a time in your life when walking was a real challenge. But you practiced. You fell a lot, but you got back up and tried again and over time walking became a habit...something you no longer needed to think about because muscle memory had taken over. That's the beauty of a habit. With enough practice we can do something really difficult without even having to think about it. It just comes naturally.

I can remember learning to type in high school on something called a typewriter. Anyone remember those? What I remember is how awkward it was getting my fingers to hit the right keys at the right time. Today I can type 100 words a minute without even thinking about it. My brain thinks about a word and my fingers just make it happen. It's magical. Pretty amazing when you think about.

In so many ways we are the accumulation of our habits. We become the things we do habitually, repeatedly, without thinking about it. And that principle is as true in discipleship as it is in every other area of life. A disciple is someone who apprentices themselves to someone, to learn what they know, to do what they do...to become like them. That describes our relationship with Jesus. We connect our lives by faith to Jesus' life, learning what he knows, doing what he does, drawing on the power of the Holy Spirit. It's awkward and challenging at first, but with practice we develop habits that shape our lives more and more into the likeness of Jesus.

And that is exactly what Jesus is talking about in today's Scripture reading from John 15. Let's read it together:

¹ *"I am the true grapevine, and my Father is the*

gardener. ² He cuts off every branch of mine that doesn't produce fruit, and he prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more. ³ You have already been pruned and purified by the message I have given you. ⁴ Remain in me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful unless you remain in me.

⁵ "Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ Anyone who does not remain in me is thrown away like a useless branch and withers. Such branches are gathered into a pile to be burned. ⁷ But if you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask for anything you want, and it will be granted! ⁸ When you produce much fruit, you are my true disciples. This brings great glory to my Father."

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Throughout this worship series we are going to be talking about developing the spiritual habits that deepen our faith, empowering us to experience the fullness of life that Jesus promised, and ultimately transform our lives more and more into the likeness of Jesus. But no matter what spiritual habit we're talking about, the goal is transformation. It's life changing. We practice the habits and the Holy Spirit does the work of transformation.

And that's what Jesus is describing in our Scripture reading. Using the metaphor of a grape vine and branches, Jesus is telling his disciples...and us... about the importance of staying connected to him. Various translations use various words here...abiding, remaining, staying joined...but they are all describing an intimate, life-giving relationship.

To be honest, I struggled with Jesus' words for a long time. I believe that Christ lives in me through the presence of the Holy Spirit. So, how can I NOT be connected? It took a while for me to understand that what Jesus is really describing is what I would describe as awareness. Have you ever gone looking for your sunglasses, only to discover that they've been on top of your head all along? You were connected to those glasses, but unaware of it. That's how it is with our connection with Christ. Scripture teaches that Christ dwells in us through the presence of the Holy Spirit, but we aren't always aware of it. The spiritual habits are those practices that increase our awareness of

Christ in us.

But even that might be a little squishy, a bit ambiguous. Fortunately, Jesus provides a little clarity around what it means to remain or abide in him.

First, he says, “Abide in my love.” It’s so easy to say, and so hard to do. I make mistakes. I fail. I hurt someone with my words or my actions, or I fail them. And then my inner critic tells me that I’m worthless. Unworthy. Unlovable. I forget that I’m loved, not because of what I do or fail to do, but because God chooses to love me. Can you relate? To abide in Jesus’ love is to live in the constant awareness that we are never unworthy, never alone, never unloved. No matter how badly we blow it. We need to tune our ears to the Holy Spirit’s voice that never speaks of condemnation, but of the love of God for us. Can you imagine how different life would be if you never believed or felt unloved or unlovable? Seems impossible, doesn’t it? But like all spiritual habits we can get increasingly better at abiding in Christ’s love with practice.

Second, Jesus says, “Let my words abide in you.” How do we grow in our awareness of Christ’s presence? How do we stay connected to the vine, the source of life? We immerse ourselves in the words of Scripture like an actress immerses herself in the script of a play. The words of Scripture become our words, the script of our lives. Not only do we know them, but we do them. That’s how Jesus’ words abide in us, and it develops our awareness, our connection with Christ.

And it isn’t just the Bible that does that for us. Authors like Richard Rohr, Brian McLaren and others can also help Jesus’ words abide in us in fresh ways.

I don’t know about you, but I often struggle with this abiding business. I do devotions in the morning, but sometimes I’ve forgotten what I’ve read by the time I’m done with breakfast. James addresses this issue in a rather pointed way. He writes,

Obey God’s message! Don’t fool yourselves by just listening to it. If you hear the message and don’t obey it, you are like people who stare at themselves in a mirror and forget what they look like as soon as they leave. But you must never stop looking at the perfect law that sets you free. God will bless you in everything you do, if you listen and obey, and don’t just hear and forget. (James 1:22-25)

Ouch. Guilty as charged! When Jesus says “Let my words abide in you” he isn’t just telling us to read it or hear it in worship. He’s telling us to know it and apply it in our everyday lives. We’ll talk lots more about dwelling in the Word next week.

Have you ever watched a basketball game that’s really close and near the end? A player gets fouled and comes to the free throw line to try and sink a couple of crucial baskets. And if that player is not from the home team, have you ever noticed what the fans behind the basket do? They jump up and down, waving their arms, yelling at the top of their lungs. They’re trying to distract the player, to make it more difficult to hit the shot.

Life is like that. It’s so easy to be distracted. There’s so much noise. So many activities. So much to do. And 24/7 news keeps us riveted to every crisis around the world. How do you possibly grow in your awareness of Christ in you in the midst of all that? The same way that you get to Carnegie Hall. You practice, practice, practice until what was once exceedingly challenging becomes second nature.

That’s our goal in this worship series. To equip you and inspire you to practice these habits that deepen our awareness of Christ in us and the work of the Holy Spirit that transforms us into the likeness of Christ. Does that mean you’ll be able to walk on water, turn water into wine, and feed a big crowd with just a tuna fish sandwich? Probably not! But if you want to experience the peace that Jesus knew, the confidence he had in God who loved and cared for him, his seeming lack of worry and anxiety, and an extraordinary capacity to love others...if you want to experience more of that in your life, these spiritual habits are your path.

Let me offer you some practical steps that you can take this week to deepen your awareness of Christ in you. If you want to take a small step, write “You are loved” on a piece of paper and hang it on your bathroom mirror to remind yourself daily of the depth of God’s love for you.

And if you want to take a bigger step, get into the Word in community. Join us for the Engage Bible Study which has already started here in September or get into a small group. Engaging with God’s Word in community is such a powerful practice, especially if you hold one another lovingly accountable to doing what you hear. You’ll find more information about Engage and Small Groups on our website or call the church office and we’ll get you connected.

Learning to walk was once a challenge. Today, you’re a champion walker! I want you to dare to believe that one day, walking in conscious awareness of Christ’s love and presence every moment will feel as natural as taking a stroll down the street, no matter what’s happening around you.