

St. Luke's UMC
January, 2021
New Year Sunday

Becoming: Who We Are Meant to Be
Becoming Connected Again
John 15:1-8

Happy New Year and welcome again to 2021. The ball dropped Thursday night in an empty Times Square, which we have never seen before on New Year's Eve, and as much as we are excited to start a new year, we were probably more excited to end the old one. But while 2020 is officially behind us, we are a long way from being done with the effects of it. Yes, hope is on the horizon. Vaccines are being distributed. But caution is still needed. From the first injection a person is not fully protected from the coronavirus until 1-2 weeks after the second vaccination, roughly a 5 week period. So in the words of the Surgeon General of the United States, Vice-Admiral Jerome Adams, who is an IU Medicine graduate! we need to keep practicing the four W's: Wear mask, wash hands, Watch our distance, and Wait to gather!

So 2020 will continue to be with us for a while. And one of the hangovers of 2020, which is probably a bad analogy to use on the first Sunday of the new year, but, a carryover is our timidity; timidity to plan. One of the side affects of the pandemic has been apprehension. We've learned to qualify our plans and expectations with statements like: "If things don't change," "if new restrictions aren't imposed," "if..." We've come to use "if" a lot.

Our oldest daughter, Julie, and her fiancé, Christian, faced the challenge of planning a wedding in 2020. At first they hoped they could have something in the fall, perhaps in Colorado allowing family and their friends in California to attend, but surges in the summer changed that. SO they planned a smaller, family wedding for New Year's Eve, but the surge after Thanksgiving changed that. Now they are looking at August, but still wondering, "Will it be okay by then? Will people be willing to travel?"

So many of you have faced these same issues this past year. You understand what it means to think conditionally, "if things don't change," "if we are able..." And it can leave us feeling like 2020 rocked us with an uncertainty that says, "nothing is for sure anymore." An article by the BBC points out that when we go for long without being able to plan and know what we can look forward to, creates anxiety and can lead to depression. That's why it's important to anticipate. To look beyond the ifs and focus on what we know we are going to do. *Forbes Magazine* even offered this advice, that rather than thinking about how Covid 19 has changed life, this is the time to think about what has not changed.

So we begin today a series to start 2021 thinking about what we can count on in St. Luke's this year; who we are going to be; and the ways we are going to live out our mission no matter what changes around us. This series is called *Becoming: Who We Are Meant to Be*, and we start today focusing on becoming connected again! In 2021 we are going to be a church that helps people grow stronger in their faith and in relationship

with each other. Those two go hand in hand. We grow closer to God through community. That's not to say you can't grow closer to God without community, but we don't grow as close to God as when we are connected to each other. If we are to become who we are meant to be, then we must have relationships that deepen our spiritual growth.

In the Gospel of John Jesus uses an important image to illustrate this truth. It is one of the "I AM" sayings in John, statements that begin with Jesus saying "I am" and then using a symbol for his relationship to us and ours to each other. So John 15 begins with Jesus saying, "I am the true (or the real) vine."

This image is rich with symbolism. First, the grapevine represented the nation of Israel, God's desire to have a people through whom God works. *(pic)* In Jesus' day the entrance to the temple was outlined with a vine and grape clusters covered in gold. You can see by this model, how big it was in comparison to human figures. They say the individual grapes were the size of a person's head. Jesus uses an image people knew well, one that represented their relationship with God. Jesus claims to be that vine.

Then he says "My father is the vinedresser" who prunes the vine. Any gardener understands the importance of pruning, getting rid of dead branches and cutting back new shoots. If you don't prune a plant, it will never produce fruit as it should or could. The object is not just to grow, it's to be effective.

So if you want to be effective in 2021, if you want to grow spiritually, a good question to consider is: **what might God want to prune in your life?** Are there things that are no longer productive and it's time to release them? Are there things that weigh you down, that are dead and its time to get rid of them: negativity? Complaint? Criticism? Are there relationships weighing you down? Their influence on you is not helpful. And to be your healthiest, you need to break away? The hardest things to prune are those that were once rich and meaningful but they aren't anymore.

And the next hardest things to prune are those that are healthy and growing, but its just too much? You can't do everything? You have to choose where to focus your energy and resources and let go of the rest. What are the important places you believe God wants you to invest your primary energy?

What might God want to prune in your life? That could be a whole sermon on its own, but Jesus continues: ***"I am the vine, you are the branches, those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit..."*** This image holds the secret to spiritual vitality and what it means to be church. Let me point out two things.

First, we are branches. We draw our source of life from the vine, Jesus. But branches are not isolated from each other. They are all interconnected. What Jesus teaches in this image is that our connection to him is intertwined with our connection to each other. This picture illustrates this truth. *(pic)* It's a vine in summer when all we can see are the leaves that cover the branches and the fruit they produce. But this next picture *(pic)* in

winter shows how the vines are tangled up with each other. It would be hard to know just which branch is producing what fruit. All the branches can take credit.

We are our healthiest and most productive when intertwined with others. That's how we grow. That's how we become more loving, more caring, more sensitive, by allowing our lives to get tied up with others, and not just others like us, but people who are different, who think differently, who live differently, but share a desire to know God.

And think also about another important aspect of this being intertwined, this is how branches are able to support the weight of a grape cluster. **(Pic)** Without wrapping around each other, they could never carry that weight.

We are not meant to carry our burdens alone. We are dependent creatures. That's how we are made. We need others. And one thing 2020 taught us is how difficult isolation can be. One of the worst forms of punishment is solitary confinement? Because that is not how God made us. Remember the creation story. After each day God said, "It is good." When is the first time God uses the words, "not good." When God observed that Adam was alone.

There's a story about a Russian Czar many years ago who became obsessed with understanding the true native language of people. He wondered what language would a child speak if never influenced by other languages. What would that child say? So he took a newly born child away from his mother, had the baby raised in a sterile environment, a room where nurses would tend to the needs of the child, but they were never allowed to say a word in his presence. The experiment turned out to be a failure. The Czar never learned his answer, because before the child ever spoke, he died.

That story may be more fiction than fact, but after 2020 many of us can see truth in it, it's impossible to thrive and be fully fruitful by ourselves.

In the 1700's there were a number of major religious revivals that swept the country and even came to America. But Methodism was the only that lasted. Why? Because John Wesley knew that inspiration alone wasn't enough. Just having great preaching and music wasn't enough. People needed ways to keep their spiritual yearnings alive, so he got people into groups. Every week they would meet and simply respond to a question: *How is it with you soul?* Isn't that amazing? A religious movement spread around the world and enters now into its fifth century, because people were encouraged to meet together and share their souls. And where that doesn't happen, Methodism wanes.

St. Luke's will be a church this year that continues to help people grow closer to God and each other. Listen to what one couple in our church has to say about the small group they joined a little over a year ago... *(Potenza video)*

Starting this week small groups are kicking off in St. Luke's. You heard in the announcements that you can go to our website, stlukesumc.com, click on GROW, then groups and classes, and go to group finder to help locate a group to join. If you want to talk with someone first, contact **Rev. Mindie Moore pr Kaylee Vida at the church.**

Now, a second image I want you to think about with the vine and the branches is the feeling one has in being a branch. Just let yourself for a moment be a branch. Put out one arm, and imagine you are grasping the vine. You are connected to this vine. That is your life source. And then, put out your other arm. And on this hand open your fingers, because this hand dangles the fruit that gets produced through your life, your works, your achievements, the things God can use through what you do.

The question this exercise raises is: which side of the branch gets more of your attention? The vine or the produce? If your arms are getting tired you can put them down. But keep thinking which end you tend to look toward more.

For me, I want to say it's the vine; my connection to Christ; that is where I want to say I put my focus. But I know there is this pull in my life constantly to focus on the other end, the fruit end, what my life is producing. The trouble with that is the temptation to measure my life by what's in my hand. Am I producing enough? Should I be producing better? Is what I am producing even making a difference?

And God says, "Hey, I never called you to be successful. I called you to be obedient. As long as you focus on being obedient, and leave the results up to me, your life will more than matter."

That's probably why John Wesley encouraged the people called Methodists to prayer a very simple prayer at the start of every year. He probably saw enough Christians begin the year with good intentions, but quickly allowing their own successes or failures to take over, and either can ruin us. We can be ruined as much by success as we can failure. So he encouraged people to prayer this incredible prayer of humility at the beginning of every year that focuses us on the source of our spiritual life, on Christ, and our covenant with Him.

Wesley Covenant Prayer

I am no longer my own, but thine.
 Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.
 Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
 Let me be employed by thee or laid aside by thee.
 Exalted for thee or brought low for thee.
 Let me be full, let me be empty.
 Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
 I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.
 And now, O glorious and blessed God,
 Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
 thou art mine, and I am thine.
 So be it.
 And the covenant which I have made on earth,
 Let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.