

**BLACKSBURG PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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CHRIST THE VINE--WE THE BRANCHES

Acts 8:26-40
1 John 4:7-12
John 15:1-8

I have had old license plates from North and South Carolina (I have lived in seven different towns in North Carolina; four different places in South Carolina), two different Florida tags from different times I lived there (in four different places), Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. And I did not have a car when I was stationed in San Antonio and Del Rio, Texas. I either did not keep the plates or did not change my registration when I lived in Georgia, Tennessee (two places), Alabama (two places), Kentucky, West Virginia, Missouri, Iowa, California, and Michigan (two places). Joann and I were waiting until she was here to move our registration from Illinois to Virginia.

All of this has to do with a sense of home and where home is. For some of us, it seems easier. Some grew up in one place. For others of us, it is more difficult to say. I grew up in three.

Home for most of us has to do with place, perhaps a particular house, when means home in the fullest sense of the place on this earth where we learned to feel safe and secure and welcome without pretense.

For me, home always meant where my parents were. When my mother died thirteen years ago, one of my first thoughts was that now I am an orphan, especially in the sense of not having a place to call home, other than where I am.

Home has always meant the people and places from which my life has come and been given shape. Those people who have been friends for so long that neither of us can remember when we were not and who can help us get a sense of perspective about ourselves because they may know as well as we do what is our truest and best self. Those places where we have felt safe or known success, where we can find the calm we need to sort out life.

There may be for many of us a sense in which at least a part of what we mean by home will always be somewhere else. And for those of us for whom home has always been Virginia, home may be another time. Home may be a place we have never been but only dreamed of.

Home seems to have to do, in some sense, with continuity and connection.

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Emile Durkheim is the father of sociology. One of the important studies he did dealt with suicide. He identified three different kinds of suicide.

One is the kind required by society or social custom. The mass suicide in Jonestown, Guyana, in 1978, the *hara-kiri* of the Japanese, and the recent Heaven's Gate cult suicides in California are examples.

Another type is called *egotistic suicide*, which occurs when the individual has too few ties, too few connections, to his or her community, too little sense of belonging. There is one county in Florida that I know about, the majority of whose population are retirees, who retire from work and leave their established homes and social networks and move to a new place where they are strangers. Those who do best in their retirement there are able to establish new relationships. There are some who do not. It is not surprising to me that, when I knew the figures, that county had the highest suicide rate in the state.

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The third is called *anomic suicide*, which occurs when some crisis shatters the person's relationship with his or her community.

The last two are dramatic, external evidences of what is subjectively experienced as loneliness. [Cf. Morton Kelsey, *Prophetic Ministry*, 115] The first seems to me to be a willingness to hold to connection with community and experience annihilation rather than loneliness.

Durkheim showed a relationship between loneliness (being disconnected from the people around you) and physical death. It has milder forms as well, depression being one of them.

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Jesus too talked about the relationship between death and being disconnected from life. Jesus also talked about being connected to life, to that which gives life, that which maintains life, that which makes life what it can be.

The way Jesus said it is: *You are already made clean by the words that I have spoken. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. All who abide in me, and I in them, they are the ones who bear much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.*

Jesus spoke using the image of a vine and its branches on which the fruit, if there was to be any, would grow.

The image of the vine was a powerful image for the Jew. In their consciousness of themselves as God's chosen people, the image of the vine symbolized their relationship with God. As the prophet Isaiah said, *For the Lord of hosts in the house of Israel.*

In front of the holy place in the Temple was a golden vine with its fruit.

The vine is that which takes from the soil all the nutrients that the plant needs to produce fruit. The vine delivers these nutrients to the branches.

The branches require a great deal of care. In the early years of a vineyard, the branches are not allowed to bear fruit but are cut back. This pruning conserves and develops their capacity to bear fruit.

The branches which do not bear fruit only sap the strength of the plant. They too are cut away.

It is only through the vine that the branches receive what they need to give them life and what they need to bear fruit. The branches on their own do not have the capacity to bear fruit nor even to live apart from the vine from which their life comes.

It is that intimate connection with the vine that is necessary, that is essential, that is indispensable for the branches to have the life they were meant to have.

What is true of the branches in a vineyard is no less true of people.

If Durkheim's study is at all true, what is true as a spiritual reality--that intimate connection with Christ is essential for meaningful life--may also have devastating implications as a physical reality.

Christ is the vine. We are the branches.

Whatever life we have that is meaningful, whatever life we have that bears fruit of the abundance of God's love, is the life we receive from Christ. And that life comes from the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ.

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If we go back to Good Friday and the events of that day that led up to the crucifixion, the maneuverings of the religious leaders, if we go back to Good Friday when the earth fell dark, and look at Jesus and his agony on the cross, we will learn at least one thing: we will know that **God is not safe from us.**

God saw all that separates us from God, all that severs the branches from the vine, and

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was willing to expose himself to all that the power of sin in human flesh could do.

God did it because he loves us so and knew that the only alternative for us, as branches separated from the vine, was death.

And so God came to us in the person of Jesus, speaking to us a truth we are free to ignore, living a life we are free to ridicule, offering us a life and love that we are free to reject.

God does not hide away from us in a safe place but exposes himself to the hurt because God loves us and is not willing to give us up.

If we go back to the day after the crucifixion, we can learn something else: we will know that **we are never safe from God.**

The chief priests and the Pharisees asked Pilate to secure the tomb, lest the disciples steal the body and perpetrate a hoax on the people. Pilate told them to use their own guard and to make the tomb as secure as they could. [Mt. 27:65] And they did.

They had no sense of the inevitability of the resurrection, and they intended to protect the world from it. They thought it would be that easy, that they could make the tomb and the world secure.

They had not seen the life in Jesus, the life-giving vine in Christ, and they thought they could keep the world secure from the power of that life.

The power of that life is so strong that it can break through death and tombs and guards and loneliness and whatever barriers we put up to make our lives secure (without realizing we are really just trying to make them secure from God).

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That resurrection life has the power to reach into human life and to connect us with the source of life and to cause us to bear fruit that we have not the power on our own to produce.

I remember reading an article in a runner's magazine which talked about people who make radical changes in their lifestyle. It said that people do not make such radical changes in their habits, diet, and exercise until they have accepted the fact that they are going to die.

I used to smoke cigarettes. I watched my father's health problems, many of which could be traced to his smoking. That was not enough to get me to quit.

One day, shortly after a routine physical, my doctor called and said, *There have been some changes in your chest X-ray.*

The problem was not serious and cleared up right away, but, in the few seconds before he told me it was not cancer, I felt the icy cold of my own mortality, and death became very personal. Then I quit smoking.

One colleague said we are all walking around with time bombs inside us. That doctor's call was the first time I heard mine tick.

Life became precious to me in a way it never had before. I was able to choose life and to begin pruning away some of the unproductive branches in my own life and to let life live in me.

However it may come, we are never really safe from the power of God to give us life and cause us to bear fruit. The life that God gives causes us to face the full agony of the cross that Jesus faced, to face the full agony of separation from God in our own lives as well.

It also will not let us ignore the agonies of life and what they have done to others.

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We cannot make our lives secure from the terrible needs of human life, whether those needs are in us or our neighbor in Blacksburg or any people in need whom Christ treats as

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neighbors.

The victory of Easter was not a rosy optimism that did not look at the human condition, pretending that all is well. On the cross, it faced all the obscenity of sin and separation from God.

Easter is the giving to us of life that the worst of sin could not destroy, the God-given life that heals loneliness and whatever sin would do.

Easter is the doing, not of the human will, but of the will of God. God's love is the victor. Death is not the end. The end is life. [Cf. Frederick Buechner, *Magnificent Defeat*, 81]

And that life is the life of Christ. And our lives through him, bearing fruit.

Christ is the vine. You are the branches. Abide in Christ, and Christ in you.