

Intimacy with God

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John 15:1-8, Galatians 5:22-23

Jn 15:1 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.

Jn 15:2 He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.

Jn 15:3 You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.

Jn 15:4 Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

Jn 15:5 "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

Jn 15:6 If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.

Jn 15:7 If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.

Jn 15:8 This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

Gal 5:22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

Gal 5:23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

Here is a truly amazing thing – too wonderful to fully comprehend: The awesome God who created this immense universe – the Eternal One who is above all power and above all thrones – wants to have a personal connection with you and me. God says to us in Jesus Christ, "I have made you and I have redeemed you. Now let's walk together and I will show you what life is all about. Stay connected to me and your life will be rich beyond measure: *"...remain in me and I in you," says Jesus, "I am the Vine and you are the branches. If anyone remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit..."*

Eugene Peterson renders this verse (John 15:5): *"I am the Vine, you are the branches. When you're joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant..."*

I like that– *"the relation intimate and organic."* This agricultural image of vine and branches is really the language of relationship – of intimacy. God wants to be on intimate terms with each one of us. We can know him in a deeply personal way.

It is certainly a goal of our church to want to encourage everyone's intimacy with God. We do not simply want to know about God; we want to know God. For us, God is not just a theory or a philosophical principle, but a Living Being – a Person with a capital "P" – who knows us and loves us and who can be known and loved in return.

According to one Christian writer, Carlo Coretto, the closest human analogy to the sort of relationship that God has in mind with us is marriage. *"In marital love,"* says Coretto, *"it is not enough to study the beloved, write poems, or receive cards from far away. Couples must marry, say "yes" to one another, go behind the veil of intimacy, delight in one another--exultantly, become close, cultivate friendship, stay together as much as possible, coalesce their wills, make two things one, as scripture says."*

Each of us can and ought to enjoy that sort of intimacy with God. But unfortunately, says Coretto, *"many Christians only pretend to know God."* They study about God in books, they make him an object of speculation, approach him for intellectual discussion, but they never really get to know him personally. Christian faith becomes a theory to think about rather than a love affair to be pursued.

Like any personal relationship – be it marriage or a friendship – or, in this case a relationship with God - we have to work at it. It's like riding a bicycle – if we don't keep peddling, it falls over. Healthy relationships just don't happen. It takes effort. It takes time. It takes attention. If we don't put anything into building a relationship, we can't expect to get anything out of it. It is as simple as that!

There is an old story about a greatly loved priest in a little French village. In the small village he had performed marriages, baptized babies, and buried the dead. In his 25 years, he had touched every family as he pastored the small village church. It was decided that an anniversary party would be given for him after church one Sunday. Wine is a gift of honor to the French, so each man in the village was to bring a quart of wine and pour it into a large wooden cask that would be sitting on the steps of the church.

After the Sunday morning mass, the priest was told what had been planned in his honor. The congregation and the old priest moved outside the church and he took a goblet and drew out the first glass of wine. Instead of wine, out came a clear, colorless liquid that looked and tasted like water.

The priest, believing that some of the water in the wine had settled to the bottom, threw out the water and shook the barrel to mix the liquid inside. He filled his glass a second time and again he got another glass of water.

Someone took the lid off the barrel and looked inside. The barrel was not filled with wine but with water. What had happened? One thrifty Frenchman did not feel he could afford a quart of wine and thought that, if he could pour water in the barrel, it would mix with the wine and no one would know the difference. Unfortunately, every man in the village did the same thing!

The point of the story: you can't pour water into the barrel and expect to take out wine!

Unless we make an effort to put something into building our relationship with God, our faith gets more and more watered down. We can't expect to maintain a vital, growing relationship with God if we are not willing to put forth the effort and take the time and attention it deserves.

So, then, what must you and I do build our relationship with God, so that we are walking with God day by day and are connected to the Vine?

Prayer is certainly key, for it is through prayer that we give God purposeful time and attention. In prayer, we intentionally spend time in God's presence. Certainly we cannot be on intimate terms with anyone if we do not spend time with them.

I heard about a common laborer who every morning on his way to work would sit quietly in the church sanctuary for twenty minutes and then get up and leave. He would do the same in the late afternoon after work. When asked what prayer liturgy he was using, he said, *"I come in and sit for a few minutes. Then I say 'Jesus, it's me, Jimmy.' And he says, 'Jimmy, it's me, Jesus.' And we just sit there together for awhile."*

There is a lot of truth in that model of prayer. Maybe at times it enough just to consciously be in God's presence.

Carlo Carretto, whom I just quoted, believes that prayer is the sum of our relationship with God. He says:

We are what we pray.

The degree of our faith is the degree of our prayer.

The strength of our hope is the strength of our prayer.

The warmth of our charity is the warmth of our prayer.

No more or less.

As I say, no relationship can become more intimate without being the presence of the Loved One. Prayer keeps us connected with God.

In that regard, I have been trying to be more intentional in turning my thoughts to God throughout the day, thanking him for the beauty around me, praising him for simple gifts of food and friendship and love, asking God for wisdom as I tackle certain problems, seeking his strength to deal with the daily challenges of life. Prayer doesn't have to be long and formal, confined to certain periods of the day – it can be something of an ongoing conversation with God. The important thing is that we "practice being in the presence of God," calling God to mind continually. The Apostle Paul talked about "praying without ceasing."

If prayer keeps us connected to the Life-giving Vine, so too, does the faithful reading of scripture, for we do not know how to pray unless we know the One to whom our prayers are addressed. Thankfully God tells us who he is and what he is like and what he wants us to do in scripture. Jesus reminds us that his word must remain in us if we are to stay connected with Him. *"If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you", says Jesus.*" Dietrich Bonhoeffer gives us wise counsel:

"The Word of Scripture should never stop sounding in your ears and working in you all day long, just like the words of someone you love. And just as you do not analyze the words of someone you love, but accept them as they are said to you, accept the Word of Scripture and ponder it in your heart, as Mary did. That is all. That is meditation....Do not ask "How shall I pass this on?" but "What does it say to me?" Then ponder this Word long in your heart until it has gone right into you.

Besides the practice of prayer and the regular reading of the Word, there is of course, the habit of Sunday worship, the practice of the sacraments – especially Holy Communion (which we will be celebrating in a few moments). These are what theologians have called “means of grace” – they are the means provided by God to help us grow in him. They are the means the Lord has provided whereby we are enabled to remain connected to the Vine and to the Source of life itself. Someone has rightly said, *“Our God is a God who works by means, and He will never bless the soul of that [person] who pretends to be so high and spiritual that he can get on without them.”*

The simple fact is that without effort there is no growth. How do we know if we are growing? Are there any clues to whether or not we are growing spiritually? Paul suggests there is one test, namely, growth in the fruit of the Spirit: *“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”* (Gal 5:22-23) This is in line with Jesus who said: *“I am the Vine and you are the branches. If anyone remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit...”* *“When you are joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant.”*

Our relationship with God will show in the fruit we bear in life – fruit that comes from a godly character – it shows especially in the way we treat other people. Connected to Jesus the Vine, you and I will be empowered to serve in his name. More and more, people will be able to see Jesus in us.

As we begin this new season, let us dedicate ourselves anew to the practice of prayer, the reading of the Word, the habit of Sunday worship, and to Christian service. The closer you get to God, the more “intimate and organic” the connection, the more you and I will bear fruit in our lives. So may it be!