

“Hanging Out with God”
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Based upon John 15:9-17

Last Sunday, we heard Jesus say to his disciples, “I am the vine. My Father is the vine grower. You are the branches.” He uses this image to expound upon the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the community of followers. There’s the expectation that with this relationship fruit will be produced and pruning will be essential if the branches are to thrive and live. But is there a purpose beyond having a healthy vine that grows and thrives? Where are you going with this, Jesus?

In today’s passage from John’s Gospel, which is the continuation of this part of Jesus’ farewell discourse, we are given the “why.”

“I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete.”

Well, we want to thrive and grow in our faith. We want to receive the joy that Jesus wants us to have. But is this joy Jesus desires for us a goal to be attained, an end unto itself? Is it the finish line, or is it the process in moving towards the finish line?

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen in her book, “My Grandfather’s Blessings,” writes about her rigid, atheist parents having a conversation with her grandfather who was a rabbi and instructing him not to speak to Rachel about God or any of his other superstitious beliefs.

She writes, “Well, they may as well have told him to stop breathing.” Rachel grew up hearing lots of stories from her grandfather who tried to honor her parents by rarely mentioning God’s name. Yet she knew.

He told stories of communities who faced famine and would have died had it not been for the help of strangers and foreigners, of people who had to flee oppression and traverse a wilderness to get to a new land, stories of kings and queens and these people called prophets who gave constant reminders that widows and orphans are first in line for attention. She said it was years before she realized that the source of these stories was the Bible.

Later as an adult she reflected that her religious upbringing likely took a greater hold on her than if she had gone to religious classes each week. She does recall that some of the stories disturbed her, and she told her grandfather that there were things in these stories that seemed so unfair like Moses who worked so hard to lead the people to a new place to live then did not get to go himself. “It’s unfair, Papa. Moses did not get his dream.”

“Oh, my dear one,” said her grandfather. “But he did.” He reminded her of **MITZVOT**. It’s a Hebrew word that comes from the word *mitzvah*, meaning divine commandment. A **MITZVOT** is an action that expresses the will of God. Rachel’s grandfather explained **MITZVOT** as those human actions that help move things in the direction in which God is trying to move them. Such

actions are God's hands in the world, making God's intentions, our own. "Moses did get his dream, Rachel. Whether we experience the end result or not, our true joy is received in the actions that move the world towards God's hopes."¹

Jesus would call these human actions works of love or bearing fruit. As the branches are to a vine, we are connected and entwined in relationship with Jesus Christ, and God's hopes and dreams become our own.

In his life on earth, Jesus moved the world closer to God's intentions. This was his relationship to the Father, and this was his joy. In Jesus' farewell discourse before he leaves them, this image of the vine, his knowledge of God, and this work is entrusted to his followers that they might receive and come to understand the joy that comes in moving the world closer to God's will.²

Jesus says to his followers, "I do not call you servants any longer." Now, if you are not comfortable with the terminology of master and servant, think of student and teacher. It's not exactly the same, but the point is that Jesus is taking this relationship with the disciples to a different level. Jesus is entrusting his followers with what is most precious to him. It's often what we do with our friends.³

Now, I am always comforted in knowing that Jesus Christ is **my** friend. I can sing every word of the hymn "What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear. What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer." I love those words of assurance that Jesus is my friend, and I can take anything and everything to the Lord in prayer.

But what does it mean for me, for us to be Jesus' friend?

As followers, we are entrusted with knowledge and with work that only a friend would give to a friend.

Jesus said that being his friend means abiding in God: remaining in God, hanging out with God through story, through prayer, through service, through community so we might continuously deepen our understanding and therefore be a better friend to Jesus.

It's rooted in love. In *John* 13 at the last supper after washing the disciples' feet, Jesus told the disciples that he was giving them a new commandment to love one another as Jesus has loved them. Then this love that is first cultivated among the followers flows out beyond that community to actions that express God's will in the world.⁴

Now, something that happens with church types or theology types or people who love the Bible types is that we freely talk about the images that Jesus gives us, "I am the vine, you are the branches. I have appointed you to bear fruit." We talk about joy. We talk about love. We cherish

¹ Rachel Naomi Remen, MD. "My Grandfather's Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge and Belonging. Berkley Publishing, New York: 2000.

² Gail R. O'Day. "Gospel of John" in New interpreter's Bible; Volume III, Leander Keck, Editor, Abingdon Press.

³ Gail R. O'Day.

⁴ Gail R. O'Day.

the commandment, “Love one another as I have loved you.” We teach this to our children and our youth.

But often these words and images do not get translated enough to the level God intends. We’re not given these words and images for purposes of generalizations and beautiful language. We are given these images and words for the “nitty-gritty” and “down and dirty.” We might be tempted to keep things general, but God couldn’t be clearer about the necessity of these words and images becoming specific concrete actions that express God’s will.

The biblical scholar, Gail R O’Day, writes, “There are serious ethical considerations to this love commandment. The history of the church suggests that to love one another may be the most difficult thing Jesus could have asked of us.”⁵

It’s a commandment!

Francis Taylor Gench asks the question in her book, “Encounters with Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John,” can love be commanded? No, not if it’s simply a feeling. The love of which Jesus speaks in this Gospel is something we do regardless of how we feel. This is not a Hallmark card kind of love. Love has been redefined through Jesus’ giving of himself. This love seeks the wellbeing of others. This love is sacrificial. Gench goes on to write, “So, it might come as a relief to you that God did not command us to like everyone, but we are commanded to love. The wise spiritual teacher, Henri Nouwen said, “If we wait for a feeling of love, we may never learn to love as Jesus commanded.”⁶

Hanging out with God as branches on the vine is going to stretch us and challenge us and take us to uncertain places because friends ask things of friends that they might not be able to ask of mere acquaintances. Think of your closest friend. What would you do for them, and what would they do for you? What have they entrusted you with? Where will you not let them down?

What kind of a friend are we to Jesus? Where will we not let Jesus down?

If we are honest, we know there are times we do let Jesus down and fall short of our side of this friendship. We don’t help move things in the direction in which God is trying to move them. In fact, there are times we work to block that direction because of our fears, our complacency, our prejudices, and our determination to be in control. It’s why we are given confession and always the opportunity to begin anew and set things right on this course of being Jesus’ friend.

I attended Ecumenical Advocacy Days a few weeks ago, and the theme was displaced persons, refugees, migrants, and immigrants. I attended a panel whose members were DACA recipients. We could not release their names or their information because it’s not the safest time for them.

One young woman spoke of walking across the border at age three while her mother carried her seven-month old brother. She’s in her early twenties now, but she tells of a faith community in

⁵ Gail R. O’Day.

⁶ Frances Taylor Gench. ‘Encounters With Jesus in the Gospel of John.’ Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky: 2007.

this little Texas town who took in her family, found housing, work, resources, and protection. She said not everyone in this church was happy about sponsoring her family.

But most stayed even those who were not completely comfortable. The church members jumped right in even with uncertainties of how things might go. It was not an easy commitment.

It was not a friendly town. This woman said, “People were constantly putting up obstacles. Some did horrible things to get my family to leave. They tried to bury my family. But what they did not realize is that we were seeds. The church understood that we were seeds. And what do you do with seeds? They cultivated and watered and nourished us so that we could lay down our roots. So, we sprouted and we grew and we blossomed and we thrived, together with these friends, we all grew and we thrived.”⁷

The picture on the front of your bulletin is the only sculpture that remained standing at the Paradise Ridge Vineyard and Sculpture Garden after the northern California fires last fall. The other sculptures were destroyed as was the vineyard.⁸

My colleague is the pastor of a church in this area. As the fires continued to rage and burn, this four-letter sculpture spelling **L-O-V-E** brought hope and comfort as the people in the smoke and ash covered valley looked up at what was left of the vineyard.

The session meeting at my colleague’s church had just ended and the elders were in the parking lot walking to their cars. One elder looked up at these letters L-O-V-E against the hazy sky. “Well, at least there’s something that made it through the fire. It’s comforting, isn’t it? L-O-V-E, it never ends.”

The elders smiled in agreement. But one elder took a minute and then he said, “Yeah, it is comforting for sure. But, you know, I think there’s more.” “What do you mean?” asked the others. “Well,” he said. “We have all **hung out with God** enough to know that this sculpture is not just for our comfort. It’s a command. We have some work to do.”

And with that these friends of Jesus walked back into that church to make a plan for how they could turn their church building into a shelter and bring resurrection to a devastated community.

Where is our **MITZVOT**, those actions that move the world in the direction God is trying to move them? You are good at this discernment, but when we hang out with God, we know we can never get too settled and self-satisfied.

How will we as the community of Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church **continue** to help move things in the direction God is trying to move them?

What kind of a friend to Jesus will we be?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!

⁷ Testimony Presented from DACA Recipient at Ecumenical Advocacy Days, Washington, DC. April 20-23, 2018.

⁸ Paradise Ridge Vineyard Picture following Sonoma Fire appeared in New York Times, October, 2017.