

## ABIDING, CONNECTING, BEARING

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John 15:4-5

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Rally Sunday, Capital Campaign Kick-Off, 9/11 Anniversary

*Abide in me as I abide in you. Just 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. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.*

-John 15:4-5

I.

A year ago this morning, I walked into the church library. A group of retired, and otherwise employed, ministers was gathering. They were there to assist me. Having served this church for two years as the Associate Minister, I was now the acting Senior Minister while Jim White was on sabbatical. In particular, I remember the face of Gene Yelken, distressed yet caring.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Haven’t you heard?” someone said.

“No, tell me.”

They told me what they knew - an airplane, a tower, smoke, New York City. We had a lot of questions. What was happening? What would it all mean?

Thinking back, I now realize it was a good place to be, a very good place to be in that moment, among people who had given their lives to care for the church and its people, people who had lived through other dark days - Pearl Harbor, D-Day, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a Missile Crisis, assassinations, Vietnam. I felt, in that moment, connected to a community that had borne grief in former days, a community that had lasted out other storms, a community that had not flinched in the face of unanswerable questions.

In the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of John’s gospel, Jesus is speaking to his own community. He’s saying goodbye, he’s grieved to leave them, and he’s worried about them. He encourages the disciples, above all, to stay connected, to hang in there, to abide. Stay connected to me, and through me, to one another.

The Greek word for “abide,” *meno*, can also be translated to remain, to last out, to stay put, and to “hang in there.” Hang in there, Jesus tells his disciples, when things are hard. Hang in there when it feels like you’re being pruned. Hang in there when you don’t feel like it any more. Hang in there with me, because I’m hanging in there with you.

As Eugene Peterson's *The Message* puts it:

*Live in me.*

*Make your home in me just as I do in you.*

*In the same way that a branch can't bear grapes by itself but only by being joined to the vine, you can't bear fruit unless you are joined with me.*

*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.*

*Separated, you can't produce a thing.*

## II.

My hope is that the common experience we shared ten years ago today will lead to greater connections, connections with our neighbors, connections with those we often take for granted - cleaning ladies, accountants, firefighters, and soldiers - connections with the rest of the world, including places that have experienced tragedies far greater than we experienced 10 years ago today, places like Rwanda, Sudan, Iraq, Afghanistan, Haiti, even Japan. My hope is that war, insecurity, and distrust will not be the end of our story. My hope is that resurrection is possible, that rebirth is possible, that rebuilding is possible and that new, life-sustaining connections will be the legacy of our grief. "Abide in me as I abide in you."

Many of you have seen and heard the sparks of that hope. Perhaps you witnessed hope last Thursday night at the screening of the film "Rebirth." Listening to the stories of five people directly affected by the collapse of the two World Trade Center Towers, you might have heard something like hope. You might have felt something like healing. You might have recognized in their stories, your own story, in their grief, your own grief, in their struggle, your own struggle, in their rebirth, the labor pains of your own new life. Did you laugh or cry you heard the teenager tell the story of what happened when he spoke in his synagogue at his mother's memorial service? He named all the things she was to others - friend, aunt, sister, wife. And then, in the very moment he said the word "mother," a bird landed on his head. He reached up and took it in his hand, smiling, looking at the congregation with disbelief. The bird remained there, until the rabbi came to assist, and as soon as the teen let go, the bird flew away.

"Abide in me as I abide in you."

It is amazing, even eerie, that the prescribed Gospel reading for today, from the revised common lectionary, is Matthew 18:21-22: Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

In another film, *The Power of Forgiveness*, Martin Doblemeier tells the story of three women brought together by the loss of their husbands on September 11, 2001.

Together they contemplate what it would mean to forgive. To forgive themselves for anything left unresolved in their marriages. To forgive those responsible for the clean up effort, which included hauling tons of debris, including people's remains, to an open space on Staten Island. To forgive those who plotted, those who carried out, the attacks. None of this forgiveness seemed remotely possible to these women until they were invited to Beirut, Lebanon, to participate in the blessing of a garden of forgiveness planted in the bombed out remains of building. There, they heard the stories of other women, a world away, who had experienced loss, and who had determined that forgiveness was their only path to healing. Women, coming together, connecting, sharing loss, sharing life, sharing visions of a new world, holding out for the possibility of forgiveness.

“Abide in me as I abide in you.”

### III.

What does it mean that we, as a congregation, today, on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of September 11, 2001, and on the day each year that we launch our program year, what does it mean that we are also launching a Capital Campaign that is about “Building Connections”? Our congregation has been building connections ever since its founding in 1874. The founders of this church were also the founders of The Colorado College. Originally, they had intended to found a “College Church.” But they ultimately decided to build a college to serve the community, and a church to nurture those who valued mission, service, education, and the congregational way. Inclusiveness has been a value of this congregation since its founding.

The Rev. Dr. James Gregg, pastor of this congregation when this church building was erected, said this in his farewell sermon: “Do not allow this church ever to become in anywise an exclusive and therefore unchristian society, but keep it always as inclusive of all persons as is the grace of God made manifest in Jesus Christ.”

The Building Connections campaign that we launch today is an audacious attempt to build upon the legacy of the past. We are building connections with one another and with people in our wider community by making our building a safer, more functional and inclusive space.

- By rehabilitating our sanctuary, we have made our sacred space more beautiful and inviting, not to mention safe and sustainable.
- By refurbishing the organ, we will make this marvelous instrument playable by any and all organists, without apology, and without having to ask them to play around its numerous faults.
- By modernizing the kitchen, we will be able to offer more gracious hospitality as we break bread with our guests.
- And by installing a long-imagined elevator, we will make our more and less historic spaces accessible to all.

These are the projects we will fund through this campaign. These are improvements to our facility that we as a congregation have determined are important as we look to

the future. And our goal is an audacious one: \$2 million. It is an audacious goal because it is a lot of money and because now is a time when many are anxious about the economy. But audacity and tenacity and trust are what the people of God are called to embody in the world, even and especially in times such as these.

#### IV.

A major goal of this campaign, besides funding the building projects, is to create more and stronger connections between members, and to nurture connections between our congregation and the wider world that we are called to serve. It's happening, and those connections will be a part of the legacy of this campaign.

In 100 years, our descendents will be sitting in these pews. Perhaps they will find occasions to tell our story: "Did you know what this congregation did on September 11, 2011?"

"No, tell me."

"Well, it was the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a terrorist attack that led to two wars. The political atmosphere was rife with resentment and dysfunction. The economy was uncertain. Many people in the country were just looking out for themselves. The members of this congregation were thinking about each other. They were thinking about others in the region who were looking for an inclusive, dynamic, thoughtful, and playful community of faith. They were thinking about the future, about you and me, and they committed themselves to raising two million dollars - that was a lot of money back then - to care for and improve the building where we sit today."

"Abide in me as I abide in you. Just 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. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing."

Do you hear the good news? As God's people, we cannot do it alone because we are not alone. Jesus abides in us. What he offers is relationship, with him, with God, who is working so that the vine will bear much fruit. We are not alone. We are connected. Look around you. Here Christ abides, and here we abide in Christ. This is a good place to be, a very good place to be. Together, we've borne the grief. Now it is time to bear the fruit. Amen.