

I

A newspaper reporter went to interview a successful entrepreneur. "How did you do it?" he asked. "How did you make all this money?"

"I'm glad you asked," the entrepreneur replied. "Actually, it's a rather wonderful story. You see, when my wife and I married, we started out with a roof over our heads, some food in our pantry, and five cents between us. I took that nickel, went down to the grocery store, bought an apple, and shined it up. Then I sold it for ten cents."

"What did you do then?" the reporter asked.

"Well," he said, "then I bought two more apples, shined them up, and sold them for twenty cents." The reporter thought this would be a great human interest story.

"Then what?" the reporter asked excitedly. "Then my father-in-law died and left us \$20 million," the businessman said. That man prospered not because of his own ingenuity, but because he was connected.

Connected. Think about that word for a moment. What does it mean to be connected?

I. It Means Power

First of all, it means power, doesn't it? We hear someone say, "I have connections." It means "I have access to power, wealth. I can get it done."

There's a humorous story about another successful businessman who was invited to deliver the commencement address at a school. He elected to speak on the subject, "How to Succeed." As he entered the door leading to the auditorium stage, he noticed the word PUSH printed in bold letters on the outside. He thought that would be a good theme for his speech PUSH. When he hit the high point of his speech, he said, "I can sum up my message in one word," and he pointed to the door . . . and the students started laughing. Puzzled, the speaker looked at the door. Printed on the inside was not the word PUSH but the word PULL. (1) That is how many people succeed not because of their PUSH but because of their PULL because they are connected to someone who is powerful. How often have we said, "It is not WHAT you know, but WHO you know"?

Julius Little of Greenville, North Carolina was hospitalized for congestive heart failure. The doctor warned him his recovery would be slow. His daughter Judy told him not to worry. "Everybody in my church is praying for you," she said. Still, he said, he was fearful. In a matter of days, though, he began to rally. In fact, in practically no time he felt like himself again. Even his doctor was amazed at the progress. He saw no reason why Julius and his wife, LaRue, couldn't go through with their travel plans to visit Opryland in Nashville, Tenn., on their way to visit Judy in Blue Springs, Mo.

And so they made their way to Opryland. It was hot and crowded in the theme park, so

LaRue rested on a shady bench while Julius went to find a cold drink. LaRue struck up a conversation with two friendly ladies sitting beside her on the bench. They couldn't believe it when LaRue told them she and her husband were on their way to Blue Springs, Mo. to visit their daughter. "Why, I'm from Blue Springs!" said one of the women. "What's your daughter's name?"

Julius walked up just as this friendly woman said that she was a member of Judy's prayer chain. Then she exclaimed to Julius, "I've been praying for you. I thought you were really sick . . . What in the world are you doing standing here?" Julius smiled sheepishly. "I'm standing here," Julius said, "because of you." (2)

Julius is convinced he was standing there because he was connected. He was connected to the ultimate source of power and healing. That is the first thing we mean when we say we are connected. We have power.

II. We Have a Presence.

To be connected also means we have a presence. We have a presence in our lives. We are not alone. Someone shares our life. Someone is there for us. Is there anyone sadder than the person who is not connected to somebody? Consider the alleged Unabomber an obviously intelligent man who reportedly committed bizarre and cruel acts. Can we help but deduce that part of his problem was that he cut himself off from family, colleagues, and friends? There is something about isolation that does something to the human spirit, whether that isolation is chosen or whether it is caused by circumstances beyond our control.

Many of you have had the experience of being cut off from someone you love by death or divorce. There is no more devastating experience in life, is there? The loneliness and the sense of isolation can be overwhelming. All kinds of experiences can cause us to feel disconnected.

Sometimes it's having your children grow up and leave home. I understand that there is a luncheon group of older mothers in New York. They call themselves the "It Wouldn't Hurt You to Call Me Once in a While" club.

Paul Tournier tells a story about a lonely lady he once knew who turned on her radio every night just to hear an announcer with a friendly voice say, "We bid you a very good evening." She felt the announcer was the only person who cared about her. (3)

There is a program at the University of Florida in which veterinary students staff a hotline to help grieving pet owners cope with the death of their precious animal friends. The students receive specialized training to learn how to counsel and assist callers

experiencing painful emotions. "There is a tremendous need for such a service," says faculty member Thomas Lane, who spearheaded the project. Growing numbers of

single and elderly people rely on pets for companionship, feeling the death of a pet as strongly as that of a family member or friend. (4) If you don't think people can grieve over the loss of a pet, you know nothing about loneliness. Isolation is a terrible way to live.

Tim Kimmel in his book, *Little House on the Freeway*, tells about his mother, who died of cancer. From the time the doctors discovered it to the time it took her life was only five months. Her decline was swift and unstoppable. Surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy had no effect on it. It was difficult for the family to watch her die.

Tim and his younger brother flew 2,000 miles to see her three times in the five months that she was sick. During the last month Tim called every morning to see how she made it through the night, and every night to see how she made it through the day. Tim's father stayed with his beloved wife every day. Tim's three other brothers and sister all lived in the area. They stopped by regularly, almost daily, to be with her.

Shortly before Tim's mom died, a wealthy, influential member of that small community was admitted to the intensive care unit for observation. On the third night of his stay in the hospital, he had a discussion with the nurse who was preparing him to go to sleep for the night. Tim called the unit shortly after she finished working with this wealthy gentleman. She couldn't help but relate their conversation to Tim.

This young nurse was a committed Christian. She knew of Tim's family's love for Christ and of his mother's quiet but compelling testimony. She told him that the man she talked with was one of the most powerful men in the community. He wielded great influence, even at the hospital. Yet he had lain in that hospital room for three days without a single visitor. He had a wife, and he had children, but they had not come by.

As she was giving him his medicine, he inquired of the patient in the private room. "Oh, that's Mrs. Kimmel," the nurse replied. He wanted to know about Tim's father and his brothers and sister. She told him all about them and mentioned that her two sons out of town had flown back to see her several times and called daily to check on her status. He asked about Tim's mom's condition. "Mrs. Kimmel will die any day," the nurse told him. "If she lives a week, we'll all be surprised." At that point this man of influence dropped his head back on his pillow and got quiet. Just before she walked away, he looked up at her with tears in his eyes. "You know," he said in a husky voice, "I would gladly trade places with Mrs. Kimmel and die a week from now, if for that week I could have a spouse and children who care enough about me not to make me die alone." (5)

We all have a need to be connected. We need to know that there are people who care about us. We need to know that we are not alone. Of course, this is where our faith

comes in in a powerful way. Our faith tells us we are not alone. We are never alone no matter how isolated our situation seems.

Columnist Sheila Graham had a compelling interview with Ruby Bridges Hall sometime back. Maybe that name doesn't strike a bell. It will for some of you if I describe what Ruby went through as a child.

Ruby looked like a typical first-grader. With a big bow in her hair and lunch box in hand, she climbed the steps of William Frantz Elementary School for the first day of school. But little else was typical about that day in November 1960. Though she wasn't aware of it, Ruby had been chosen to be the first African-American child to integrate this particular New Orleans grade school. Every day on her way to school, escorted by armed federal marshals, she braved angry whites shouting at her as she entered an empty classroom. White parents had moved their children to other schools. Ruby did not realize until later, when a little boy told her why he couldn't play with her, that she was the reason for all the commotion.

In her interview Sheila Graham noted that even in this stressful situation of having mobs scream at her, little Ruby prayed every day, before and after school, for those who were verbally abusing her. Ruby Bridges Hall explained it this way: "One thing my mother always said to me was that when she couldn't be with me, if I was ever afraid, I should say my prayers . . . Even at night, if I would wake up from a nightmare and want to get up and go to her room, she would immediately ask, Did you say your prayers?' That's where that came from and it sort of stuck with me." (6) Ruby's mother wanted her to know that no matter the situation she was never alone. She was connected. To be connected is to have power. It is to have an eternal presence in your life. It is to know Someone cares about you.

III. To Be Connected Is to Live a Productive Life.

And one thing more, being connected means living a productive life.

The reason many people fail to achieve great things with their lives is that they lack a focus, they lack a driving sense of purpose. Like Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's play, they live their lives not really knowing who they are. And so they fail to make their mark in the world. If only they could be connected to One who could give them a sense of purpose, a sense of mission, a sense of their place in the world. And of course that is the Good News for the day. We CAN be connected to One who can give us the power, One who can give us the presence, One who can help us live productive lives.

Jesus put it this way: "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit . . . If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you . . ."

Here it is the great secret of life. Here is the secret of having real "pull" in the things that matter most. It is to be connected connected to the One who is the ultimate Source of power, to the One who will never forsake us, to the One who will help us live productive, meaningful lives.

Vineyard owners tell us that the strongest point on any vine is the place where the vine and branch are joined together. If you pull on a branch that goes into a tree it will always break at the trunk of the tree in a tree that is the weakest place. But in a grapevine that is the strongest point.

That should not surprise us. Christ says to us: I have the strength to provide all your needs. I have the strength to hold you in the time of testing. I will never let you go. When we are joined to him, we have a source of power, presence and purpose. We live productive lives. When we are joined to him we can truly say, "I've got it made. I've got clout. I've got a Friend in high places."

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1. Joe Gordon, SPEAKER'S LIBRARY OF BUSINESS.
 2. GUIDEPOSTS Jan.1997 p.17.
 3. "Reach Out!" by Frank Minirth, TODAY'S BETTER LIFE, Spring 1994, p. 38.
 4. American Veterinary Medical Association, 1931 North Meacham Road, Suite 100, Schaumburg, Illinois 60173-4360. CITED IN THE FUTURIST.
 5. (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1987).
 6. "Dignity Under Fire," THE PLAIN TRUTH, May/June 1996, p. 28.

Collected Sermons, King Duncan, Dynamic Preaching, 2005, 0-000-0000-20

II DeSeani

“Mother, please, I’d rather do it myself.”

This was the opening line of a commercial that always got us laughing back in the 1950s. The daughter was trying to cook, the mother comes over to do it the right way, the daughter huffs and puffs, and then says her line: Please, mother, I’d rather do it myself. They were selling Anacin, a brand of aspirin; I was surprised, with my ten-year-old brain, that people got headaches over little things like that.

But doing things yourself has become a whole way of life, D-I-Y as they say, with tons of books and YouTube videos to show you how to do one thing or another all by yourself. Cook lasagna, put up a deck, change the keyboard on your laptop, figure out why you are still living at mama’s home—there’s a resourced so you can fix something or even fix yourself.

We bring this attitude, unfortunately, into our faith and our relationship with God. We think our spiritual life is all about our efforts and the decisions that we make. “Your purpose in life,” I was told as a child, “is to save your soul.” Follow the commandments, do what your parents tell you, follow laws of the Church—that’s how you saved your soul and how you went to heaven.

As a result, the Gospel we hear this weekend is one of the most important ones for our spiritual lives, for our lives as disciples. “I am the Vine,” says Jesus, “you are the branches.” Whatever is in the branches, whatever is in us, comes from the life that the Vine gives us. Without the Vine we can do absolutely nothing, Jesus says. Without the Vine, and receiving the life the Vine gives us, we are useless and need to be thrown out. Jesus saves us by giving us his life.

What we are seeing here is the absolutely essential teaching of the Church about grace, which is God’s generous favor given to us out of love. Our whole Christian life is basically a response to the grace that God gives us, a gift we could never merit. The grace that is life, mercy, and reconciliation from God. This teaching of the Church is sometimes very hard for us because we think the project in life is to fix ourselves by our own wits and energy. The project, rather, in our Christian lives is to accept the fixing, the forgiving, the loving, that God continuously pours into our hearts.

Isn’t this the experience of Saul, whose Greek name was Paul, who had everything figured out in his spiritual life until, one day, he received the gift of encountering the Risen Christ? Isn’t this the experience of the early Christians who formed communities filled with abundant spiritual gifts, seemingly out of nowhere? Isn’t this the gift that we all receive with the assurance of the forgiveness of our sins?

The idea is not that Christian life means sitting around doing nothing. Rather, the idea is that our Christian life is accepting as deeply as we can the generous grace that God pours into us. God wants us to produce fruit, yes indeed. But the fruit we produce is what God has planted in us, now given the sun and water of divine care, and the Spirit that makes us grow in our following Jesus.

III

It is fascinating to me that in our Southern Protestant religious culture, such a strong emphasis is placed upon literal interpretation. Interestingly, Jesus so often did not speak literally, but figuratively. He spoke in allegories and images. He painted word pictures. Instead of literally coming out and saying what he meant, he so often would tell a story and let people draw their own conclusion. Indeed, these hidden messages of Jesus frequently frustrated his disciples. They wished that he would speak literally and not be quite so subtle.

This morning we take a look at one of the "I Am" sayings of Jesus. Jesus said: I am the true vine. Now, even the most ardent fundamentalist has to agree that when Jesus spoke these words he was not speaking literally. Obviously, if we are to understand what Jesus was getting at here, we must look beyond the surface and do some exploring. We have to go beyond the actual words and discover Jesus' meaning.

When Jesus spoke about vineyards, the people of Judea knew what he was talking about. It was an industry that had been carefully cultivated throughout the country for centuries. It was crucial because it was a cash crop as opposed to grain, which was raised purely for consumption. In early America the essential crop was corn, but the cash crop was tobacco. It was, therefore, vital to the economy of the land.

Quite frankly I must admit that I know very little about the particulars of the wine industry. In preparation for this sermon I did some reading in this area and it was really quite fascinating. The vines are a very rugged crop in a way and in another sense it is a very delicate fruit and requires being treated with kid gloves. A young vine is not permitted to bear fruit for the first three years. It is therefore drastically pruned in December and January to preserve its energy. The particular branches that do not bear fruit are cut out to further conserve the energy of the plant. If this constant cutting back was not done, the result would be a crop that was not up to its full potential.

So when Jesus spoke about vineyards certainly the people could identify with that metaphor, even as a person in Iowa would know about corn, or in Mississippi about cotton. It didn't make any difference whether or not you were in that business. You had grown up around it enough that you would still be familiar with it.

But there is something else that these listeners would most certainly know. A vineyard was the symbol of the nation. In America we might think of amber waves of grain, but in Judea they thought of their nation as a vineyard. It was a kind of national identity. Over and over again in the Old Testament, Israel is pictured as the vine or the vineyard of God.

Isaiah the prophet pictured Israel as the vineyard of God. He said: The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel. In Jeremiah, we read God referring to his chosen people in this way: I planted you as a choice vine. Hosea spoke a word of judgement when he said: Israel has become an empty vine. In the Psalms we read that God compares Israel to a vine that came out of Egypt. Josephus, the Roman historian,

informs us that over the Temple in Jerusalem was carved an exquisite, gold leaf grapevine. It stood as a symbol of national unity. Israel itself was, in the eyes of its people, the true vine, whose roots ran all the way back to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

In Jesus analogy, he likened himself to a vine, while the fruit bearing branches here are the disciples. God the farmer is depicted as the one who cultivates the vineyard. He waters and tends the soil, so that the vine is properly nourished. He takes pride in his crop. But this means that he also prunes the vines and removes the dead wood. The grapes hang on to the branches. What Jesus is saying is clear. The disciples should receive their strength from Jesus. He is the true vine. If they break away from him, they will be like unproductive branches and die and bear no fruit. They then will have to be pruned out.

What can we make of this analogy in terms of our daily life? What does it mean to be God's vineyard?

I

First, I think that it raises a question that we must all answer: Are we bearing fruit for the Kingdom of God. How can you tell a pear tree? By the fruit that it bears. How can you tell an apple tree? By the fruit that it bears. How can you tell a Christian. By the fruit that he bears? It is just as simple as that. The fruits of the vine are not church attendance, or Biblical knowledge, or your individual stewardship. Even though all of those things are important, the true fruit of the vine is a loving and compassionate life. Folks, it all comes down to this how do you treat other people? That is is simple and as direct as I can put it.

How well I remember a particular lady who was in my little country church in Tennessee many years ago. It was interesting to me that before I even met her everyone was telling me about her. They were saying: She is such a religious person. It is true that every time she came to church she brought her Bible with her. Indeed, everywhere she would go all over town she took her Bible with her. At the evening worship we would frequently call upon lay people to pray, she would always be the first to stand, and her prayers were nothing short of exquisite. It seemed like the subject of religion was always on her mind, in fact, almost to a fault. She almost didn't know how to carry on a simple conversation without bringing that up. I didn't have any problem with any of these things. The problem that I had was that when it came to people who were down in society the poor, the unemployed, divorced persons, alcoholics she was relentless in her criticism. She was without mercy and compassion. There was judgment and nothing else. After a while, despite all of these outward appearances of religion, and despite everyone calling her a "religious" person, I had to begin asking myself the question: Does this individual really bear the fruits of the Christian life?

The issue is not how much knowledge you have or even necessarily how sincere you are. The issue is how do you treat people? If you are in Christ people will be able to see the fruits of your life in terms of our compassion and love and attitude.

II

Secondly, the saying says to us that there is such a thing as an unproductive life. In Jesus analogy, the farmer (God) is depicted as pruning out bad branches. We don't like to wrestle with that concept, because it implies that God cuts some people out. There is an element of judgement in it that we would just as soon not deal with. There are those who are quick to point out that Jesus was here specifically referring to the Jews. That is true. But we miss the point if we do not understand that this law of nature also applies to Christians.

Dead branches are not only non-productive, they pull the energy away from the vine and keep it from fruit bearing new branches. We like to think that there are various degrees of allegiance, but the truth is that in God's vineyard there are only two kinds of branches those that bring forth fruit, and those that do not. The former are cultivated, the latter are pruned. God blesses the lives of those persons who are productive for his Kingdom.

III

Third, we must cultivate a meaningful relationship with Jesus Christ. Jesus said: You must abide in me and my words in you. He is talking here about a relationship. As the fruit receives its nourishment from the vine, so too do we turn to Christ for our daily nourishment and growth. How tragic it is that so many today see their strength as being financial security, or peer respect, or their own creative ingenuity, or a host of other things. These things may feed us for a day or even for a season, but there comes a time when they will not bring the deep nourishment that we seek. For that we need God.

Marian Anderson, perhaps the greatest soprano who ever lived had such a wonderful relationship with her mother. It was said of Mrs. Anderson's life: her music could bring one to tears; her life could bring one to their knees. She was once being interviewed and she was asked the most wonderful moment in her most impressive career. She could have mentioned that time when the great Arturo Toscanini told her that hers was the greatest voice of the century. She could have mentioned that time when she sang before the Roosevelts and the King and Queen of England. She could have said winning it was winning a coveted award for the person who had done the most for her hometown of Philadelphia. There was also the time when she sang before a crowd of 75,000 on Easter Sunday beneath the Lincoln statue. Which of these high moments would she chose? None of them. My greatest moment, she said, is when I went home to my mother and said: Mom, you'll never have to take in washing again. If this relationship can exist between a mother and a daughter, then how much more can be our relationship with Jesus Christ? I am the true vine he said. As the father has loved me, so I love you. And what happens when we abide in him and he abides in us? Our joy will be made full. Amen.