

Connected on the Vine
Sermon for May 2, 2021
John 15:1-8; 1 John 4:7-21
Wilton Presbyterian Church
Rev. Shannon White

I have always loved a good road trip. And, when you think about it... life is one big road trip, isn't it?

As we go along our way, we are joined by others. Some people are with us for just a little while; others walk with us for a lifetime. We all know the journey of life has a variety of twists and turns. There are stops and starts and new directions, sometimes requiring hairpin turns. There are the proverbial two steps forward and three steps back... and sometimes it feels like the world opens up and nothing is in the way of progress. There are scary parts and joyful parts. There are parts that take us right through the valley of the shadow of death and parts that lead to places completely unexpected, completely unimagined. The journey just continues, and we keep going. Those who travel with us may be family, friends, clergy, therapists, and other helpers... and some may not even be aware of their assistance in our lives in helping us find our way. Such is the case of online helpers, for example.

Sometimes people will engage a counselor or a therapist to accompany them for a part of their journey that is particularly hard because of grief or loss or sadness or separation. When that aspect of the journey is over, the counselor's role may be complete, and we continue on without them. I am grateful to those who have done that for me.

During the time before death, many folks have found find comfort and strength through the service of hospice and other palliative care groups.

Hospice workers become companions for that very crucial part of life's journey.

Congregations travel a journey through the years. Along the way, people join, while others go in different directions. Babies are baptized. Children grow. Students graduate. Couples marry. People move in. People move out (as we have seen over this pandemic). Others drift in for a bit and then step out for a while out of personal exploration. People die. We mourn their loss... Culture shifts. Conditions change, and we adapt and try to discern the way forward, as we have done this past year.

And then, there's the fact that pastors come and go too. In the two plus months since I announced my June 13th departure from Wilton Presbyterian Church, you all have begun to shift and plan your next steps forward as a congregation. As I said in my letter to the congregation, I know that my part of the journey here is coming to a close, and I need to hand the baton on to the next visionary leader. I know that your journey as a congregation will continue with faithfulness and exciting mission, just as mine will.

Why am I so confident in that? Because we are all grounded in the vine which gives us life and sustains us which is the theme in the text Virgil read. This is one of the 7 "I am" statements which the Gospel of John uses... the others are:

- I am the Resurrection and the Life;
- I am the Good Shepherd (last week);
- I am the Light of the World;
- I am the Bread of Life;
- I am the door;
- I am the Way, the truth and the life.

The vine in this story represents Jesus. And in our Christian faith, we believe that we get our life, our very sustenance from a spiritual source ~ from God, and that we are all connected. All of the branches coming out from the vine are equal. No one is better or worse, but we all need to be connected to the source of life to sustain us. As long as we are connected... whether we are strong branches or little sprigs, we will grow.

The branches on the vine may be very different and we may feel differently about things. We are, for example, a big tent denomination, and all connected to the vine. There are people who feel very differently about issues which are important and which affect people's lives, but about which people have felt differently since our founding. In the course of traveling through the decades together, our denominational church has struggled together through some significant issues, praying and discerning, resulting in an expanded understanding of the scriptures as they relate to ordination, eliminating previous barriers of gender and then, in more recent decades, barriers related to sexual orientation. Similarly, the church has come to expand its definition of marriage beyond a relationship of a man and a woman to include any two people seeking to commit themselves to one another in love.

In the company of one another and with the companionship of the Holy Spirit, our journey has led us to a new place. That happens and has happened time and time again in our life together as Presbyterians. We change, we grow, we learn. In our reformed tradition, we claim the phrase... reformed and always reforming... changed and always changing... The Holy Spirit leads us to new understandings of Scripture as we view it "through the lens of the redeeming life and ministry of Jesus Christ," as Jack Rogers said in *"Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality."* The Holy Spirit has led us to new places because that's what God does. From the beginning, God is about creation, about bringing forth new things.

Our life with Scripture is a journey and it's still going on. All of us are still traveling. The whole church is still traveling. And the vine always brings new growth.

In the passage from *"Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope,"* author Joan Chittister says this: "The God who made this world has blessed it with good things, yes – but all of them take working at: coconuts need to be cracked, soil needs to be tilled, mountains need to be climbed, water needs to be conserved. God does not do this for us. God simply companions us as we go. God has given us in this unfinished world a glimpse of eternity and walks with us through here to there."

Indeed, God travels with us because God is our sustenance as we thrive on the vine.

Right as I was making my announcement of my departure, I made an appointment with a coach with whom I have worked sporadically over the last few years. He preached for us last summer, the Rev. Dr. Roy Howard. He is a recently retired Presbyterian clergyperson who last served at a church in a large Maryland. He had been there for 20 years. My question to him was, how do I leave well? I have left other churches, but the circumstances have been different in each place. So, my question to him was how do I leave well from THIS place, which I have loved and served for 8 ½ years?

He asked me to think about scriptures which have dealt with leavings and blessings and benedictions... we talked about several, including Jesus leaving the disciples both in his death but also his ascension. He asked me to consider these months... which has now dwindled down to a month... as a period of blessing and benediction. He encouraged me to map out the weeks leading up to my departure and form a mosaic, if you will... knowing that each visit, each email blast, each committee meeting,

each worship service... is part of the mosaic of benediction which we are sharing together.

I liked that... and have been keeping that in mind with each interaction I've had over these last few months, and will continue to have until my ministry comes to an end here. So, my journey with you is not over. You and I are continuing to put pieces together of the mosaic which we are, and which we have created. The seeds of ministry which we have created over these last 8 ½ years will carry on as well, long after this time, I am sure. You will journey on with your Interim and then your next installed pastor who will shepherd you into and through your next period of ministry.

So, let's make the best of the time we have. And know, I am grateful to have walked this part of the journey together. May we be open to what we can learn from one another, so that we might be open to the God who is the vine.