

Sermon: You've Got To Know When to Hold 'em

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Preacher: Rev'd Mike Rayson, OSL

Church: Nameoki United Methodist

Scripture Lesson John 15:1-11 GNT

"I am the real vine, and my Father is the gardener. He breaks off every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and he prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it will be clean and bear more fruit. You have been made clean already by the teaching I have given you.

Remain united to me, and I will remain united to you. A branch cannot bear fruit by itself; it can do so only if it remains in the vine. In the same way you cannot bear fruit unless you remain in me.

"I am the vine, and you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will bear much fruit; for you can do nothing without me. Those who do not remain in me are thrown out like a branch and dry up; such branches are gathered up and thrown into the fire, where they are burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, then you will ask for anything you wish, and you shall have it. My Father's glory is shown by your bearing much fruit; and in this way you become my disciples. I love you just as the Father loves me; remain in my love.

If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love.

"I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete".

Message Rev. Mike Rayson

(singing in your best Kenny Rogers voice...)

*On a warm summer's eve, on a train bound for nowhere
I met up with the gambler, we were both too tired to sleep
So we took turns a-starin', out the window at the darkness
The boredom overtook us, and he began to speak*

*He said, "Son, I've made a life out of readin' people's faces
Knowin' what the cards were by the way they held their eyes
So if you don't mind me sayin', I can see you're out of aces
For a taste of your whis.....**grape juice**, I'll give you some advice"*

*So I handed him my bottle and he drank down my last swallow
Then he bummed a cigarette and asked me for a light
And the night got deathly quiet, and his face lost all expression
He said, "If you're gonna play the game, boy you gotta learn to play it right"*

*You've got to know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em
Know when to walk away and know when to run
You never count your money when you're sittin' at the table
There'll be time enough for countin' when the dealin's done*

I'm glad I'm not a chronic gambler. Left to my own devices, I think I could be, but I'm glad I'm not. You see I like to rationalize risk. If something isn't going my way, well I'll try it one more time to see if it will... and then one more time for good luck... and then one more time to see if it works again. Which is actually the definition of insanity.

Having been out to Las Vegas a few times, I've watched some people dump extraordinary amounts of money into slot machines, only to lose it all. And then to dump another enormous amount of money only to lose it all. All the while, that thought of – "if I just pull this lever one more time, I could be a millionaire" echoes in their head.

There are plenty of people around the globe who regularly indulge in what seems like reckless behavior. At the time it doesn't seem quite so reckless... but when the dealings done, and there are no more cards to play or chips to cash or levers to pull... the walls come down and the wheels fall off.

Then... and only then... do we see our behavior for what it really is... reckless.

Ask an alcoholic whether they think they are acting recklessly when they are living it up at the bar having a great time. The answer you'll probably get is... no. Ask a gambler if they are thinking about how reckless they are being when they go all in on a hand of cards, and the answer you'll probably get is... no.

Ask anyone with an addictive behavior whether they feel reckless when they are involved in the very thing that has ensnared them, and they'll likely look at you like you have just grown a third head.

I guarantee you that notwithstanding a few buckets of snow in the Midwest, there are millions of people in North America this morning who are enjoying a lazy Sunday filled with bacon and eggs, the newspaper, maybe a little golf on the TV. And if you asked them if they were being reckless with their lives, they'd just laugh at you.

Jesus highlights reckless behavior this morning in the scripture reading... the kind of recklessness that most people don't realize they participate in.

I am the vine, and you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will bear much fruit; for you can do nothing without me. Those who do not remain in me are thrown out like a branch and dry up; such branches are gathered up and thrown into the fire, where they are burned.

Let me make my point abundantly clear.

"I can worship God on the golf course if I want too".

"I am spiritual but not religious, so I don't need the church".

"God can be found in nature just as much as God can be found in the church".

"My faith is my business... I don't need a preacher telling me my business".

"God and I are quite ok doing our own thing thank-you".

When it comes to not being a part of a church community, human beings are capable of coming up with some very creative excuses. Jesus, however, doesn't leave us much wiggle room when it comes to living out our faith independently as opposed to living out our faith as part of a community.

I am the vine, and you are the branches.

Not... I am the vine, and you are the branch... like you are the only thing attached to God. But I am the vine, and you are the branch-**es**.

A grapevine is a community, not a solo kind of plant. One vine can spread itself across an entire pergola... or in this country, a “per-golla”. One vine becomes a mass of interconnected branches... branches give birth to branches give birth to branches that sometimes even give birth to grapes. Rarely... if ever... does a vine consist of one branch.

Well I don't need the church – I can worship God out on the golf course.

There is some truth to that statement. You can worship God out on the golf course. Just like you can worship God watching some hair brained preacher on TV rant and rave about miracle spring water or seed money or even Mr Joel “My legs on fire – but its ok – it just God getting’ my attention” Osteen.

You can worship God doing the laundry. You can worship God by being spiritual but not religious. You can worship God in nature, and you can worship God sitting in your armchair watching football on a Sunday afternoon.

BUT...

If they are the only ways you worship God, you are missing out on what God has planned for you. And not only are you missing out, you're in danger of being pruned...

The second promise a United Methodist Christian makes when they become a member of a United Methodist Church is the promise of their ‘presence’. This is a very deliberate and important promise. It says... I promise to be present with God and with the people of God on a regular basis.

So yes... you can worship God on the golf course, but the golf course is absolutely no replacement for communal and community worship. Successfully executing the perfect putt is no stand in for the sacrament of bread and wine. And accidentally hitting the gold ball right into the middle of the water is not baptism.

Worshipping together is not about the kind of building we have or the name above the door. Worshipping together corporately is all about being ‘community’. Community for each other, and community for others.

I am going to make a bold statement. A Christian who believes they do not need to be a part of God's church is in danger of being cut off from the vine and burned. A Christian who believes they do not need to be a part of God's church is in danger of being cut off from the vine and burned.

Those who do not remain in me are thrown out like a branch and dry up; such branches are gathered up and thrown into the fire, where they are burned.

We are not built for solo work. We are not created to be individuals. We are created to be communities. We are created for togetherness. We are created to be the people of God, not the person of God. Private alone time worship is great... but community worship, where we connect with each other, is – I believe – EXACTLY what God had in mind for each and every person God has ever created.

Without community, who are we? Without relationships, who are we? When the first human Adam walked in the garden, Elohim – the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – said to each other, it is not good for human to be alone. So Adam slept, and as Adam slept, God created male and female. God created ‘relationship’. Can you imagine someone saying, well I can be married and play as much golf as I want!!! Yeah try that one out and see how it works for you!

Jesus says, *Those who remain in me, and I in them, will bear much fruit; for you can do nothing without me.*

Remaining in Jesus is not a solo effort. Remaining in Jesus already requires a relationship. And it’s not an exclusive “just on the golf course” kind of relationship, but a togetherness kind of relationship. Can you imagine saying... Yes I know Jesus – he plays golf at the same time I play golf each week, but he’s always a few holes ahead of me, and when we compare scores at the end of 18 holes, doggone it he’s usually clocked in at 18, whilst I struggle to even make par.

My Father's glory is shown by your bearing much fruit; and in this way you become my disciples. I love you just as the Father loves me; remain in my love.

Living into your promise of being present as a United Methodist means that you offer yourself not only to Christ as a willing servant, but to each other as well. I am the what... the _vine_ and we are the what... the _branches_.

If we were to try and picture that, we would probably think that Jesus is like the main part of the plant that is rooted in the ground, with all the branches going off of it left and right and up and down. And that would be... wrong.

Jesus isn’t the stem, Jesus is the vine! Jesus is all of the branches and the stem and the grapes and the leaves and the roots all put together. That’s why it’s called a grape“VINE”. If Jesus wanted to be the root system, or the stem part, he would have said, I am the root and you are the branches, or I am the stem bit and you are the branches.

The full presence of Jesus occurs when the people of God are gathered together. For we can do nothing, nothing, nothing, outside of the presence of God. Nothing. We are all woven into the fabric of Christ – just as we are also called to be the hands and feet and eyes and ears of Christ in a hurting world. Jesus is the whole vine, and we are a part of it – the branches that interlock and intertwine together.

And you can’t be a solitary branch in God’s kingdom. If you are... things might get a little uncomfortable for you.

In the previous chapter of John, we read the words... *in my fathers house there are many rooms.*

It’s a favorite scripture we like to pull out at funerals. *In my fathers house there are many rooms.* Except English isn’t great when it comes to translating ancient Koine Greek.

House and rooms are two different Greek words. **Oikia** meaning house, and **Moné** (mohnay) meaning room. And just in case you were wondering I didn’t just say IKEA meaning house. IKEA is Swedish for “cheap furniture that falls apart”. **Oikia** means house, and **moné** means room. Actually, I think there’s a better way to translate these words, and in other parts of scripture, these words are translated slightly

different. **Oikia** means “dwelling”... so it’s an easy leap to see why the translators decided to use “house” as their preferred translation.

A house is a dwelling, a dwelling is a house. **Moné** means “dwelling place”. A room can be a dwelling place and a dwelling place can be a room – inside a dwelling.

But use those words in this scripture and see how it changes. *In my Fathers dwelling*, there are many dwelling places.

Where the Father is, so we are invited to be. Not just on a one on one basis, but together as the people of God. And if God is “in church” so to speak on Sunday morning when the people of God gather for corporate worship, then God expects us to be there too. Just as we get to spend time with God one on one during the week.

The gift of your presence... your “dwelling place” in the “dwelling” of God is a vital part of your ongoing faith. Don’t cast it aside as a “I’ll be there when I feel like it” kind of thing. Live into your promise of presence, and be present. Just as God has always lived into God’s promise to be present with you. Notwithstanding a snowpocalypse that is! Amen.