



Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. **AMEN**

Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed!

In the last year have you felt more or less connected to your friends and family? Just how connected are you? I for one have felt not as connected due to the pandemic, as I would like to be. For over a year, probably much like you, I did not go on vacation, go to visit my grandchild and other family, or even visit friends. At least that is true about being "in person" connected.

I also think that it is true that we are quite connected in a digital way. How many of you have been on a ZOOM call or meeting? A great many of us, have given that a try either to reach out to family or as a necessity for work. This year the statistics are proving the projection that 3 billion, that is billion with a B, people will be using some sort of social media. There are more than 1.4 billion people who use Facebook daily. And more than 50% of the users spent more time on social media during the pandemic than ever before. 70% of users say that they also used their smart phones more in 2020 than previously. Why do we feel the need to be connected?

Digital connections may be good for some instances, but for others they can be a bother. I don't know about you but I get text messages and emails all day and all night long. Lately, I have had more spam emails than ever and some are just plain annoying. Like when text messages keep bleeping on my phone during a visit to the nursing home, or when Rodney and I are out to dinner. So

why don't I just turn the phone off or leave it home? Don't like the intrusions, but want to be available if someone really needs me.

Did you ever wonder why more people don't just disconnect from the digital rat race? Well, truth is that we like to be connected to others, not to mention that we don't want to miss anything. Sometimes we even forget to turn off our cell phones in church, imagine that! If we desire to be connected to one another, I wonder if we feel the need to be connection with God as well?

Do you fret if you miss a Sunday worship service here at Christ the Servant? At least fret as much as when your internet service is interrupted for a few hours? Well, maybe we can find some answers if we look at our Gospel reading from John this morning. Our text is from chapter 15 where Jesus tells the disciples that He is the vine and they are the branches. Jesus reminded the disciples of that fact shortly after their last supper together.

I suppose that Jesus used this image of vine and branches as they headed out to the garden of Gethsemane where they passed the temple gates that were filled with images of vines and gold grape clusters, some as large as a man. Or was growing grapes for wine a familiar image that these disciples could relate too? Either way it is an image that I think we can relate to today.

Jesus said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." Sure sounds like staying connected is the way to go. So why do we need to stay connected to Jesus? So obviously, without Him we do not have a chance at true life any more than a broken branch does when disconnected to the vine. And so it is important to stay in the word of God. How might we do that? You bet, come to worship on Sunday morning and hear God's word being read, sung in song and preached. Yes, it is true we can all read our Bibles and stay home if we would rather lounge away the morning in our jammies. But don't let that be your habit, as it was during the height of the pandemic, because we need to be in church to encourage one another and also to receive the Lord's Supper.

Communion is important and even the word itself suggests community. We join in the Holy Sacrament to sustain us in our life outside of these walls. And yes, I have heard the statement that going to church does not make you a Christian any more than going to McDonalds makes you a hamburger. True,

but you have a better chance of being a Christian than a hamburger here at Christ the Servant.

When you leave here this morning I want you to look at the trees at the end of the parking lot. There are many branches that have been snapped off by our winter winds. When more leaves come on the trees you will be able to notice easier that these limbs are dead. They are no longer supported by the tree. The tree does not give them life and they cannot therefore live and bear fruit. They too can do nothing without a source of energy and power.

Our Gospel reading also talks about pruning and how God will take away the dead branches. This certainly does not mean that He will cut is off if we don't produce fruit. What I think that it means is that some things in our lives need to be pruned away for us to stay connected and grow in the Lord.

Many years ago, I worked for a landscape architect as his bookkeeper. Guess he was pleased with my work and on my birthday he gave me a 6 foot tall Colorado blue spruce. The day he came to plant it in our yard, he noticed our huge line of forsythia bushes. He told us that he had never seen such a large group of those bushes so overgrown. His suggestion was that we prune them back to within 18-20 inches of the ground. I had noticed that in the past few years they did not get those bright yellow flowers in early spring as numerous as they used too. And boy did the birds love those bushes. They used them as shelter. Well rather begrudgingly, we took his advice and what a chore that was to prune away all those bushes. We had mountains of sticks to get rid of. But in the end he was right. The next year those bushes thrived and produced more yellow flowers than ever before.

So I think that the pruning metaphor today works best if we think of God as a gardener who grieves while watching a violent storm rip through our beloved garden. Afterward, the gardener prunes the injured plants in order to guarantee survival and to restore beauty and harmony. You see, pruning has more to do with clearing away the debris that the crises in our lives leave behind.

There are days that I feel like a broken branch that needs some pruning. It happens to us all as we walk through daily life. God will change that attitude when we seek the promises of His word. And we best do that in reading Scripture, in worship, in prayer, in giving and in encouraging others. We don't have to wait until heaven to enjoy God's promise of abundant life. God's promise here is in verse 5. "Those who abide in me and I in them bear much

fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” When we connect to our God we can bear unbelievable fruit of that vine. And the greatest fruit we bear is that we love one another as God has loved us. In Him we bear good fruit for our neighbor.

And the good news is that our gracious God who gave his only son to die for us, is eager for us to bear good fruit, just as Jesus did on the cross. Our gifts of forgiveness and abundant and eternal life are ours because of what he did. Imagine what we can do if we stay connected to God and really love our neighbor as Jesus loved us. What a wonderful world this would be.

So don't think that pruning process is hurtful. It is a freeing experience, just like it was for those forsythia bushing in my back yard. They could now bear fruit once again after a good downsizing. Pruning is not a punishment but rather makes it easier to stay connected to our God. Because we do understand that without Him in our lives, we don't really have life. We are only broken, withered branches that have no life at all.

God wants better for all of us. And so I urge you to stay connected to Jesus. Technology is wonderful, but cannot connect you to Jesus. That you must do in person. One good way to accomplish that is to come to corporate worship. So borrow from your facebook or social media time and instead use the time to cultivate your relationship with God. Build a true relationship with Him that will save you and will last for all eternity.

I have a short story to close with:

Once upon a time a man dropped out of church. He figured he could worship God just as well on his own. A few weeks went by and the minister came to visit. They sat in the living room by the fireplace and made small talk. Then the minister took the tongs and picked up a glowing ember and placed it to one side of the hearth. The two men watched without saying a word. In no time, it began to cool. A few minutes later, the minister picked up the dead ember with his fingers and pitched it back into the fire. Immediately, it came back to life. Without a word, the minister put on his coat and started to leave.

The man walked him to the door and said, "That was one of your best sermons. Pastor. I'll see you in church this Sunday." **AMEN**

Christ is Risen....Christ is Risen Indeed, Alleluia!