

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

May 2, 2021, The Fifth Sunday of Lent

Psalm 22:25-31, John 15: 1-11

“...So That Your Joy May Be Complete.”

Until last fall there was a wonderful tree in the front yard of the manse that shaded my kitchen. When I was preparing meals or doing dishes at the sink, I would look out at its beautiful reaching branches.

Then one day at church one of you asked me when I was going to have the property commission deal with the dying tree in my front yard. Its dead at the top I was told. I had no idea! So, when I got home that day, I looked up past the reaching green branches at the bottom of the tree and looked into empty, bare, dead branches at the top of the tree.

I thought I knew that tree, but I only knew it through one window.

John 15 asks us to look at our lives through the window Jesus' love; Jesus who gave us these words as he says in verse 11, “so that his joy may be in us, and that our joy may be complete.” Because most of us are more familiar with tree trunks and branches this is the way I have often thought of these verses, and I'm inviting you to do the same today.

This morning I am going to invite you to experience your life in light of John 15 in two of the ways that some of our Confirmation Classes have through the years.

First, I'm going to invite you, today or tomorrow, to take your Bible with you to a place where there are big trees. It may be in your yard or in a nearby park. If you can, get outside to do this!

Pick one of those big trees and spend some time looking at it, starting at the base of the trunk and then letting your eye travel up the trunk to the branches, and then pick one of the big branches and follow that branch all the way out to the very end.

Then turn in your Bible to John 15:1-11 and read those verses and then spend some time thinking and feeling and experiencing the words, as you hear Jesus say to you, “I the vine and you are the branches, I am the tree trunk and you are the branches.”

Let the words sink into you, let them teach you about how you are connected to Jesus. If you are a person who journals you may want to journal about what you learn. Give yourself the gift of time to really hear what the tree in front of you, and this passage, are saying to you about Jesus' love for you.

Then I encourage you to read the passage one more time, and then talk with Jesus in prayer about what it means that you are one of the branches connected to the true vine, or true trunk.

The second way I'm going to invite you to spend time with these verses is something we are going to do together now. It's something we've done together a few times in worship in the past. Guided meditation is a way of praying that the Confirmation Classes and I have done together through the years.

This is a way of prayer that asked you to use your imagination.

It asks you to be open to the ways God can speak through your imagination.

What I will do is invite you to relax. and close your eyes and let my words prayerfully guide you into the passage from John we have just read. You will also be invited to let yourself experience the presence of Jesus in these moments.

As I've told the youth through the years, there are many different ways of praying, and this is just one of them. If it doesn't work for you, that's alright. I've also told them about Kathleen Norris, an amazing, imaginative Christian author. She said that when she was a child and their teacher would ask them to close their eyes and imagine something, that she usually just saw darkness and then into the darkness would appear chicken legs. That was all she could ever see. So, if this meditation isn't working for you, just open your eyes and listen. And don't worry if you see chicken legs; you're in good company with an amazing author.

Let me also say that if you are watching worship together as a couple, or as a family, or with friends, this may be a new way of being together. Please respect each other's experience of this type of praying.

After worship let each person decide whether or not they want to share their experience of guided meditation with those they worshipped with. If someone volunteers to share with you, that's great. But if they don't volunteer information, please respect each other's journey.

The other thing that sometimes happens with guided meditation is that you may find yourself feeling very sleepy as you relax into the meditation. Sometimes through the years youth have actually fallen asleep during guided meditation. And that is OK. As I tell them: sometimes we just need to rest in Jesus' presence. So, if you are worshipping with someone and they fall asleep, just let them sleep. Let the music from the hymn after the sermon wake them up gently. If you are worshipping alone, be gentle with yourself when you wake up.

START

As we enter into this time of guided mediation, I want to begin by inviting God's Holy Spirit to be present with us as we enter into this time of prayer.

And I invite you, if you are willing to set down whatever you are holding in your hands, so they are empty in your lap. You may want to place them palm up on your legs as sign of being open to what God wants to give to you in this time.

Now, place your feet flat on the floor, so you are grounded for this time of guided meditation and prayer.

When you feel ready, go ahead and close your eyes. Become aware of the way the floor feels under your feet. Feel the strength of the chair or couch or floor that is supporting you.

Feel what you are sitting on, against your back and your legs.

And now become aware of your breathing, breathing slowly in, and out.....slowly in and slowly out.

Begin to pay attention to the sounds in the room you are sitting in, and listen to the sounds outside of the room, as you continue to pay attention to your breathing; breathing slowly in and slowly out... slowly in and slowly out

As you continue to pay attention to your breathing become aware of your feet and legs, tighten the muscles of your feet and legs and then relax them all the way.

breathing slowly in and slowly out... slowly in and slowly out

Now become aware of your back and the way it feels against what you are sitting on. As you continue to breath slowly in and slowly out, slowly in and slowly out, tighten your back muscles from your lower back up through your shoulders, now let them relax all the way;

breathing slowly in and slowly out

Now become aware of your arms from your shoulders down to the end of your fingers. Tighten the muscles of your arms and hands, and then let them relax all the way,

breathing slowly in and slowly out

Finally pay attention to the muscles of your face, tighten those muscles, and then let them relax all the way. Feel the muscles of your forehead, and around your eyes and your mouth relax

breathing slowly in and slowly out

Now begin to imagine one of your favorite places in nature

allow yourself to go that place

breathing slowly in and slowly out

begin to look around at your favorite place,

feel the ground under your feet.

Feel the breeze on your face

Smell the air,

listen to the sounds around you

let yourself be in your favorite place with all your senses...

Now off in the distance you see someone coming toward you

as he gets closer you realize that it is Jesus coming to be with you.

The two of you sit down in your favorite place to spend some time together.

Together, just listening to the sounds of the place...comfortable, peaceful.

After a little while Jesus begins to tell you how important you are to him and how much he loves you.

Let yourself look into Jesus' face and see the love that is there for you

Let yourself listen to what Jesus tells you about that love that is for you.

Then again, sit in silence together. Let his words sink into you.

Jesus now says: you know how much I love you and I want you to live inside my love. Are there ways I can help you stay connected to me? How can I help you live as one of my loved children?

Spend time telling Jesus how you need his help to be connected to his love.

Now look into Jesus' face, and see the love that is there for you, and let yourself hear his answer to your request, and know this answer is just for you.

As you sit in Jesus' love, he reminds you that all growing faith needs trimming and pruning at times. Allow yourself to listen, to see if Jesus names places in your life that need trimming and pruning, so you can hold onto his love even more completely.

Let yourself feel the love Jesus has for you as he talks about pruning your faith so that you can grow.

Now tell Jesus how you feel about what he's said. Trust that he is listening to you with love.

Together you sit in silence, as friends do, for a bit longer.

Now you begin to realize that this time of being together is near the end,

spend a moment saying whatever else you want to say to Jesus, and listen to Jesus' last words to you about living in his love.

When you are ready, close this time of talking with Jesus by thanking him for the time you have spent with him...

Know that any time you want to come back here and speak with Jesus again, he will always be here waiting for you.

As you finish talking this time, you and Jesus stand. You stay standing there, watching as Jesus continues to walk back the way he came.

He wants you to remember that any time you want, you can meet him here and spend time talking, or sitting together in silence.

Spend a few more moments looking around your favorite place and thinking about what has happened.

And now when you are ready, let yourself once again become aware of your breathing, breathing slowly in and slowly out, slowly in and slowly out.

Begin to pay attention to the sounds in the room you are sitting in, and the sounds outside the room, as you continue to pay attention to your breathing; breathing slowly in and slowly out.

And now become aware again of the feel of chair or couch or floor you are sitting on, Become aware of your feet on the floor, and your hands on your legs...

Breathing slowly in and slowly out, when you are ready open your eyes, and just rest for a moment.

Remember that any time you want to, you can pray this way and spend time talking with Jesus about anything.

May the grace of God bless and protect this time of prayer you have experienced,
may the love of the true vine Jesus hold onto you,
and may God's Holy Spirit bless your journey of faith,
so that Jesus' joy may be in you, and your joy may be complete.
Amen.

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