

About thirty years ago, when I was on faculty at Penn State's Medical School, I stirred up a bit of trouble while teaching a class. I was part of a panel called together by the school chaplain to address medical students on the topic of well-being.

How could young adults, caught in the grinding machine of medical education, maintain some healthy life balance? Things such as getting regular exercise and sleep, tending to relationships with friends and spouses were all presented as important factors. And of course, the chaplain raised the issue of spirituality.

That's when I put my foot in it. I stated my belief that meaningful spirituality required membership in some community of faith – denomination or religion not specified. Well. You would have thought that I was invading the temple of science, handing out tracts and asking if they had been saved.

“What do you mean? I can be spiritual without being religious. I can be uplifted just as well while watching a sunset, or listening to beautiful music.”

My response was that one can certainly have many kinds of spiritual experiences by oneself in what Parker Palmer describes as "free floating spirituality." But we human beings are so good at self-deception that what we find there might not be God, or a higher power, but a reflection of ourselves. I don't know that I convinced many of them.

But that issue of connection is what Jesus was addressing in today's gospel lesson. On the night when he would be arrested and led off to crucifixion, he was trying to help his disciples find their way through all the coming danger and chaos. “Don't wander away from me and from each other. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches.”

And everywhere in this passage, the word 'you' is plural. It's not just you, Heidi, or you Carol, or you John who are to abide in Jesus. It's all of us together. We are to stay connected, come what may. This is not simply an agreement to be part of a group. Rather, 'to abide' means persisting, staying with, continuing together.

The word 'abide' is rather old-fashioned, not used much anymore. Then again, abiding itself does not happen much anymore. Abiding in a treaty on climate change, or a business agreement, or in a covenant of marriage, or membership in a particular church. These have all become voluntary choices that we may or may not decide to continue. But Jesus calls us to abide; to stay connected both to him and to each other.

The banner here this morning was a gift from Ivy, on the occasion of my final ordination in the United Methodist Church. There was a convent near our home in central Pennsylvania where one of the sisters, though then quite elderly, would still stitch a banner to order. You would give her a scripture reference important to you, and she would create what I consider a work of art.

The scripture I chose was from the book of Romans, and this is what she made for me. It hangs in the bedroom, beside the chair where I sit to pray. You can see that it is a representation of a soul clinging to Jesus who is both on the cross and raised from the dead, set against the swirling background of the cosmos. I have always found it a beautiful picture of intimate love.

As I looked at it last week, while mulling over the gospel for this sermon, I thought that it was a wonderful image of 'abiding' in Jesus. And then I realized, for the first time consciously, that there were also leaves and vines twined throughout the banner. "I am the vine... you are the branches."

And the scripture that I gave the sister? From Paul's letter to the Romans, the end of the eighth chapter. "For I am convinced

that neither death, nor life... nor things present, nor things to come... nor height, nor depth... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Or in other words, "Abide in me as I abide in you."

I used to think that the banner was about just one soul in connection to God. But as I recognized the vines and leaves that surround the cross, I understood that it is all connected to the community of those who abide. Without community we cannot stay on a course toward God's will for our best lives.

All this is not about connection in the abstract. It is about this community, in this time and place. Not because St John's Episcopal Church is the only location where one can belong to Jesus. But it is our place because we were called here in various ways and have made it ours. We live in an era when belonging to any group is seen as a purely personal decision. We can initiate membership when we want and terminate connection when we choose. But any time we walk away from community, we risk making our faith one more item on a consumer agenda.

On the other hand, when we abide in our place of faithful belonging, so many possibilities open up. Jesus said, "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

Dr. Susan Hedahl, professor at Lutheran Seminary in Gettysburg says, "There is something unnerving about these words. What if entire congregations wholeheartedly prayed this way? Then what? When was the last time any of us who preach invited a congregation to pray in this deliberate and specific fashion?"

Well, this preacher wants, on this morning, to invite us to just such prayer. As we are seeking the next rector for this church, we have established a committee to pray for the process. And every week we join in the prayer for the search found in the bulletin. But I want to lift up the possibility that all of us, every day

in our praying, could ask God to lead us to the person who can best help us to continue as branches on the vine that is Jesus, bearing good fruit.

For calling a rector is not just about finding a particular priest who seems to fit us. It is about our discernment of what we deeply long for our church to become. It is about bearing the good fruit of love, both here and into the world. As Hedahl says, "What if entire congregations wholeheartedly prayed this way? Then what?" As branches here connected to the vine, we can find out.