

Stay With Me: The Power of Sustained Connections
The Thing About Vines: They Cling
John 15:1-8

One of our consultants in the work we're doing this year in youth ministry is Kenda Creasy Dean, who's a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary. American Protestant religion is a relatively small pond, but inside of it, Kenda is a big fish. She's well known for her books and teaching—particularly about Christianity and young people. She is probably most famous for a book she wrote in 2010, called *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church*. The book analyzes the results of a large study of youth ministries at churches all around the country. It has lots of important data in it; but here's the one finding that really got everyone's attention.

What many young people who grow up in the church believe when they graduate from high school and go off to college, she said, is a watered-down version of Christianity that might be called *Moralistic Therapeutic Deism*. That's three complicated words, so let me break them down a little bit.

Moralistic: God wants me to be a good person.

Therapeutic: The job of God, or religion, is to help me feel good.

Deism: God is a concept, but not a person. God doesn't really do anything.

In a nutshell: God is an idea that helps you feel good and not be a jerk.

Yikes.

When that book was published, there was sort of a collective gasp that went up in the world of church leadership. It was like someone had pointed out that the emperor was wearing no clothes. Because the truth is, it's not just young people who have distilled Christianity down to that small serving of tapioca pudding; it's lots of us.

Many American theologians have observed that what the Church has done over time is shrunk down faith—both its power to ask something of us, and the expectation that faith really will make much of a difference in how we live. What they've seen is that we live in an age, a culture, where what matters most to most people is personal authenticity. What we attach ourselves to, mostly, is ourselves. In this culture, what matters is our own journey, finding out not what matters to God, but what engages and inspires us. We are responsible, we think—each of us—for creating the story of our lives. And so, we pick and choose the things that will help us follow our own path. We select from a variety of options—churches, beliefs, spiritual practices, even the moral code that will direct our actions. Some of us incorporate religion into our identity, but I'm not sure even *we* carry a strong conviction that God is *necessary* to living a good life. I wish the people I love went to church, but I don't worry for them because they don't.

Even we who identify ourselves as Christian often don't talk about faith as something that makes a claim on us, or makes us different from anyone else. In a conversation we might say something like "For me, I believe in God," or "For me, church is important." The unspoken second half of that sentence is, "...but that's just me," as if we were talking about different personal tastes—in music, or food, or book genres.

And that is really quite different from what Jesus said to his disciples in those verses from the Gospel of John that we read this morning. *I'm like the vine; and you're the branches. Branches have to stay connected. A branch can't produce anything by itself; it has to stay attached to the vine. Nothing can grow, there's no fruit, no purpose to its being there, unless it does. Stay with me, and I will stay with you. I will make you fruitful. Without me, you can't do anything. You'll be like a branch that dries up, not good for anything but firewood.*

That's not Jesus saying, 'Stay in touch once in a while; I'll be here when you need a favor or when you reach the end of your rope.' What he's talking about is something more like—clinging. Stay attached, he's saying; connect yourself to me and hang on as if it's a matter of life and death.

Why don't we do that? Why doesn't our faith feel more often like something we can't live without? I think maybe we have lost the thread of what used to seem obvious to many of our ancestors: that there is a real, personal, alive divine Being who actually does move in *this* world, and whose actions, even when they're invisible, make a difference in our lives.

In 1999, Daniel Simons, a psychology professor at the University of Illinois, did an experiment that demonstrated something he called "inattention blindness." He asked people to watch a short video. In the video, six people—three in white shirts and three in black shirts—toss basketballs around. The video watchers were asked to keep count of the number of passes made by the people in white shirts. Right in the middle of their game, a gorilla strolls into the middle of the action, faces the camera, thumps its chest, and then leaves. The gorilla spends a good ten seconds on screen.

The question was, would the video watchers see the gorilla? Of course they would, right? But when they did the experiment, half the people who were watching and counting the passes missed the gorilla—as though the gorilla was completely invisible. Impossible, right? Watch this.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IGQmdoK_ZfY

What we see depends on what we are looking for. What we focus on determines what we see. We have lived in a material culture for a long time. Our eyes are trained to focus on the things that we've been told matter: our productivity; our bank accounts; how many Twitter and Instagram followers (or church members) we have; the products we could have, our resumes and profiles. In that narrow focus, maybe we have lost the ability to notice something else. Maybe God is moving, acting in the world, all the time; and we just can't see it. We miss it because we're paying attention to other things.

Jesus told his followers—tells *us*—to stay attached, to cling to him, because it's a way of training our eyes to watch for what he saw, and what we so often can get distracted from looking for. You know when you're standing next to someone and they look up, and your eyes follow theirs, almost involuntarily? Look with me, Jesus is saying; follow my eyes. I see God everywhere, traces of grace strewn all over this world, small miracles of healing and hope, little bits of food and money and opportunity becoming enough for everyone. Let me point you in the right direction, he says; I'll show you where to look, what to pay attention to.

But it's not just standing next to Jesus that this passage suggests; it's something even closer than that. 'Abide' is the word that some translations use. 'Do you want to live a fruitful life?' Jesus asked. 'Then abide in me. And I promise, I will abide in you.' That's not just seeing someone as an admirable human being, or even as a role model. That's something more like binding two lives together, intertwining each other's pain and joy, sometimes making demands on one another. One body gradually bends into the shape of the other. One story becomes the other's story too. It's the same thing Paul meant when he said, "It's no longer just I who live; Christ lives in me."

And it's a really hard thing to wrap your mind around. The closest human analogy I can come up with is the intimacy I see in long and love-filled marriages, or the kind of whole-hearted, completely-identifying love that a parent feels for a child.

How do you cultivate that kind of abiding-in relationship with a God who is invisible to us most of the time? How do you trade in that moralistic therapeutic deism for something with more substance, a relationship with God that is more connected and fruitful?

I want to offer you this morning two thoughts, two practices that I know will work, because I have seen them. I have tried them myself.

The first is prayer. Whether your prayer is full of words, or it's a silent practice of holding yourself in God's presence, prayer is how we expose our lives to God's gaze. We ask for things, not because God is a vending machine, but because this is how we let God know what's important to us. We confess, because our fears and mistakes and brokenness are part of the whole picture of our lives. We say thank you, because every day is full of gifts we didn't deserve. Pray. Pray not because you're supposed to, but because staying connected with someone means regularly bringing your whole life and laying it out in front of them.

The second practice is less about you and more about the other person in this relationship. Get to know Jesus' story, what mattered—matters—to him. If you don't know Jesus' story, it's easy to find—inside this book, four pretty short chapters, called Matthew, Mark, Luke, John. Every one of them, in a slightly different way, tells the story of what God looks like in human clothes, what God sounds like with a human voice. Read those stories until you know what was important to Jesus, who he paid attention to, what he wanted to talk about. How startlingly edgy he could be. Read or listen to those stories of Jesus not because you're supposed to, but because this is how God brought her or his whole self and laid it out in front of us.

I think if you do these two things, you'll find that your eyes begin to see things that you might not have noticed before, signs of God's aliveness all around you. Opportunities that invite you to give yourself away. Moments when your fears about not-enough-ness somehow get taken care of. People who show up and care for you in the way you need it most, at just the right time. Little Easters—moments when a sprig of new life appears out of something you thought was completely dead.

Make that connection—between you and the Jesus who really is knowable. And then hold on, as if it's a matter of life and death. Over time, I think, you'll find your story looking more like his. Your life will bend a little, taking the shape of the vine that has been giving you life all along.

How great is that?