

"THE JESUS CONNECTION"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
April 24, 1994

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INTRODUCTION

I always look forward to this last week of April as the tulips out on Park Avenue "do their thing" once again, and the trees blossom and the Park becomes alive and green. A beautiful time of the year. Enjoy it. We deserve it!

The beauty and the majesty of living things has long captured the imagination of creative and poetic souls. A clever preacher once compared the life of faith to a garden. He said that in his Church Garden he would plant:

"Three rows of SQUASH. Squash indifference, squash gossip, and squash criticism.
Four rows of TURNIPS. Turn up for meetings, turn up with a smile, turn up with a visitor, turn up with a Bible.
Five rows of LETTUCE. Let us love one another, let us welcome strangers, let us be faithful to duty, let us truly worship God, and let us give liberally".

(My thanks to Sandra who sent this to me back in January of 1992. I've waited a long time to use it.) 'Course, it may sound a bit "corny" to some of you...if you know what I mean. Then again, some may need to hear it.

DEVELOPMENT

Have you ever noticed how Jesus was able to take "everyday things"...like flowers and birds and gardens...and turn them into "eternal truths". For instance, remember how He once said,

"I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinegrower".

There were vines growing all over the place...in Palestine...and when Jesus said that He was the "true vine", I think the people knew right away what He was talking about. And besides being familiar with vines in the everyday sense, the people of Palestine also thought of themselves as God's "vineyard" and this was due to something that Isaiah, the prophet, had once said:

"For the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts is the House of Israel".
(Isaiah 5: 7)

So the question that I'm leading up to this morning is JUST WHAT DID JESUS MEAN when He said, "I am the TRUE VINE?" Let's think about it.

OUR STRENGTH COMES FROM OUR CONNECTION WITH HIM

First of all, I would like to think that He meant that our strength comes from our CONNECTION with Him. Life begins with the vine. Branches cannot grow by themselves.

How many of you have ever been to Hampton Court, outside of London? It was the residence of Henry the VIII. A lot of history is associated with it. I remember going there many years as a student in that part of the world and spending half the day there. The gardens are magnificent. There's a maze there where one can easily get lost. There's also a grape vine there that is five to six hundred years old. And some of its branches are 200 feet long... that's long! And its single root is at least two feet thick!

Now, because of skillful cutting and careful pruning, the one vine produces several tons of grapes each year. And even though some of the smaller branches are 200 feet from the main stem, they bear plenty of fruit because they are joined to the vine and allow the life of the vine to flow through them. The GREAT TRUTH that Jesus is trying to tell us here is that if we want life in all of its fullness, then we must CONNECT up with Him - the true vine, the very source of life. "Abide in Me, as I abide in you" said Jesus. As we draw life from Him, we bear good fruit.

I came across a story by Gary Parker in a book entitled, The Gift of Doubt where the author, Gary, tells of the time that he and his college roommate, whose name was Mike, went to Whitewater Falls (South Carolina...not Arkansas) to see the beautiful waterfalls that are there. A lot of people go there on weekends mostly to see the waterfall cascade downward. Gary and Mike wanted to get as close to the falls as possible for a good view.

This meant hiking through some woods and over some glassy rocks to a point near the falls from where they would have a spectacular view. The footing was slippery and the spray was cold, but they made it and the view was fantastic. Mike, unfortunately, wanted to get even closer and pressing his luck, he slipped. Down into the swirling waters he went.

Somehow he managed to grab a rock spur and saved himself for a moment, but his grasp was weak and he knew he couldn't hold on for long. Any moment he could be swept over the falls. Now Gary, seeing his friend's plight, grabbed hold of a tree branch and stretched out over the water as far as he could to save his friend's life. For a couple of minutes, it was a struggle between life and death as they tried to make a connection. Each one clinging to their own "anchor". Suddenly, Gary had Mike's arm and pulled him out of the cold water and onto the safety of the rocks. It was a close call, and Mike was wet, shivering and frightened, but he was SAFE. Of his heroism, Gary simply said:

"All I did was to lend a hand to a friend...I acted as a source of help when someone I cared about called for it".

I liked this story for to me it's a pretty good picture of our relationship with Christ! When we're in trouble, about to "go under"...lose our hold, we reach out and He's there. And once we're connected up with Him, I believe that we can face any and all obstacles. Take hold and let Him lift you up. As the branch takes its life from the vine, so we find abundant life in Him. Put that down as the first point of today's "three pointer".

OUR LIVES ARE ABOUT BEARING FRUIT

Our text is also suggesting to us that our lives are about bearing fruit and the closer we are to Jesus, the more we will want to do those things that are pleasing in His sight. After all, what good is a branch on which there is no fruit. But remember this: bearing fruit does take effort.

There's work involved in planting and caring for a garden. It just doesn't happen. There's a bit more to it than just tossing some seeds in the ground and waiting for them to grow. Attention and preparation has to be given to the soil even before anything gets planted. Seeds have to be watered on a regular basis and weeds have to be pulled. Branches have to be pruned and if a vine is never pruned, it will not produce much fruit.

And, by the same token, we, too, like the vine need to be pruned. We need to take stock of ourselves and ask: what needs to be pruned in my life? What is preventing me from bearing fruit, or bearing more fruit than I am. Some of us may need to let the MASTER GARDENER prune away our excess baggage of things and of meaningless pursuits and poor habits.

There's a man down on 42nd Street, just outside the door of Grand Central, who polishes shoes of customers with great enthusiasm...at least that's what I'm told. They say he enjoys his work and turns a pair of leather scruffy shoes into a shining work of art. They say he also enjoys chatting with his customers...even those who are too absorbed in their papers to give much attention. One of his customers asked him why he was always so cheerful and so enthusiastic even on cold, damp, miserable mornings as people rush by. "Why are you always so happy?" He scratched his head and said,

"Jesus. He loves me. He died so God could forgive my badness. He makes me happy. He makes me smile"

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"Jesus loves me, this I know.....
For the Bible tells me so....."

It made me feel good to think that Peale's "power of positive thinking" had its roots in that simple hymn tune that so many of us learned in Sunday School as children. It made me feel good...as I stood there singing...to look over to my left and standing in the row ahead of me next to the aisle was President Nixon....singing the words. He knew the second and third verse...and didn't use a hymnal. Our prayers and our thoughts are with his daughters...his loved ones today and this coming week. Incidentally, both times I saw Richard Nixon was in a church - St. Patrick's (Billy Martin's funeral) and Marble Collegiate. Leaving Watergate out of it, one has to acknowledge that Nixon certainly practiced Peale's power of positive thinking across the years....bearing much good fruit. There's room too, at the foot of the cross for us all.

A lot of effort goes into a garden, but the end result, I believe, is always worth it. First: our strength comes from our connection with Jesus. Second, our purpose as we go through life is to bear fruit - good fruit.

BEARING FRUIT WE GLORIFY GOD

And when we bear fruit, we are GLORIFYING God and that's an essential idea for our time. Think about it. Reflect on it. I think our tendency is to place ourselves in the LIMELIGHT...to glorify NOT God, but to glorify ourselves. I loved the postgame interview of four weeks ago involving Hubert Davis of the Knicks and what's his name, Dwayne Staats. Before answering any questions on the game and his performance, Hubert said that he first had to thank Jesus Christ for whatever skills he had....and the poor interviewer didn't quite know what to say or how to handle that. I wrote Hubert Davis a letter, thanking him for taking the time to "glorify" God. Who was it who said,

"A person all wrapped up in himself
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And how true it is. Some are like the man I heard about recently who somehow survived the terrible Johnstown flood of 1889 in which so many lost their lives. The dam broke and a train on a nearby bridge was caught in the path of the swirling waters...and many lost their lives. But this one man survived and in the years that followed, he became a bit of celebrity in that part of the world. He had survived the terrible Johnstown Flood down in Pennsylvania. He enjoyed his celebrity status and became a bit puffed up. He lived to be 105 and then one day Jesus called him home. When he went up to heaven, he was feeling pretty good 'cause he knew he'd be a celebrity up there, too. A survivor of the Johnstown flood. As he walked down the center aisle of this huge heavenly gathering...to go up front and be greeted by Peter, an angel tapped him on the shoulder and whispered in his ear,

"Be careful. NOAH is also here...in this crowd"

According to the "Old Catechism", our chief end is to glorify God. I don't know many people who seem to have this as their man purpose. Jesus said,

"My Father is glorified by this...that you bear much fruit and become My disciples....."

They say that around the turn of the century in London that an outspoken atheist challenged one of London's preachers, Hugh Price Hughes, to a public debate. The preacher gladly accepted the challenge, but on the condition that he might bring along one hundred people whose lives had been redeemed by the power of God's love. They would be witnesses and would tell the unbelievers how God had touched and turned their lives around. The preacher challenged his atheist challenger, Charles Bradlaugh, to do the same...to bring along one hundred people whose lives were helped by NOT BELIEVING in God.

The debate never took place. The atheists never showed up and the preacher with his one hundred "redeemed" friends turned the debate into a bit of a worship service. And one by one these "redeemed" Christians shared the Good News. Their witness glorified God as they told those present how their hearts had been melted and remolded by God's spirit at work.

IN CLOSING Let me begin to bring this all together now. Our world needs... desperately needs...people whose sole purpose is to do a bit of glorifying of God through word and deed. To me, it's a sad state of affairs on the state of the Church we love that many people do not perceive much difference in the way church folks live and the way the rest of the world lives.

As we approach the 50th Anniversary of D-Day, I'm reminded of a story about a French LIGHT-HOUSE keeper who worked near Calais on the English Channel. As he was showing his lighthouse to some guests, one of them asked what would happen if one of his lights went out. His response was an emphatic "NEVER...NEVER WOULD THAT HAPPEN". He went on to say that if he permitted that ever to happen that he would live in fear of being responsible for a ship crashing into some unseen rocks along the coast. He added this word:

"Sometimes I feel as if the whole world is looking at my light"

That's the way we ought to feel....as if the whole world is looking at our light, which glorifies God.

God is the gardener. Jesus is the vine. We are the branches. And we stay strong by being "connected" up with Him and to Him. Our purpose, as we go along through life, is to bear the fruits of love, of hope and of joy in our world. And when we do, we glorify God.

"Those who abide in Me and I in them...they bear much fruit".

So may it be with each of us. Shall we pray.

PRAYER

Let us be still and remember Jesus as He was then. Powerful to speak and to save....to help and to heal....to lift and to love all people. And let us think of Him, as He is now...powerful as the spirit of God among us. Make us sensitive to Your presence and nearness, O God. Lift us up and set our feet once again on the high road of life. Strengthen our connection with the Christ, the life-giver. And let us bear good fruit in our lives that will draw others to Him. In His name we now pray. Amen.

LAY READER: _____

DATE: April 24, 1994

BEFORE

"The Scripture Reading for today is taken from _____

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. JOHN

Chapter 15 Verses 1 - 11

It is found on page 939 in the Bible that is in the pews.

(READER: Take note...after announcing where the reading is found, PAUSE for about 10 seconds before beginning to read. Enough people turn to the Bible to follow along...give them time to find the passage. Then start in...project... Keep your voice "up")

AFTER (Sign off with.....)

"Thus endeth the reading taken from the Holy Scripture.
May God add His blessing to the reading of His Word and
to our understanding of it.
Thanks be to God! Amen!"

(Careful walking up...and careful walking down. We don't want
any accidents...walk slowly.)

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, April 24, 1994

GREETING / VISITORS

- A. A word of welcome to the visitors in today's congregation! It's good to have you with us and we hope we'll have the opportunity to greet you in a more personal way before you depart - either at the door or (time permitting) downstairs at the coffee hour.

Be free in the sharing of your name. Fill out a visitor card. Sign one of the guest books. Come, worship with us on other Sundays....come, work with us in the outreach programs of our church. Be involved. Lend a hand.

- B. We've been doing the Lord's work at this busy corner of God's Kingdom since 1837...a long time....fourth building out of which this congregation has ministered. We like to say that we minister in the name of Christ and it is in His loving spirit.....we greet you!

- C. Members: be sure to wear your name tags...make some new friends. Reach out and greet the young men from Regis High School who are in the congregation....a "field work" assignment as part of a course - 9th grade - in Christian Theology. Boys, remember the paper is due this week. And I have a quotation from John Wesley - founder of the Methodist Church - that I shall put into your hands at the door....it will impress your teacher...

PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Parish concerns are in the bulletin. Review them on your own noting that the HOUNDS meet on Tuesday evening...the GREAT FICTION series...Thursday evening....date of SPRING RUMMAGE SALE....May the 14th.

- B. Tonight we shall have another of our MEMBERSHIP CONVERSATIONS... one in the Fall, one in the Spring...for new friends...to help them get to know our church a bit better...some there are who would like to come in closer and strengthen a tie with the church. Come this evening...around 6:20...6:30...and enjoy an evening together with present members who will speak to different concerns. New members are planning to join on May 22nd....

- C. Note that today at 1:30...a Memorial Service to celebrate the life of William Scott...brother of Bobbie Heron.

PASTORAL PRAYER: April 24, 1994

O THOU who art the SOURCE of all things good, grant that we who are so often inclined to remember what we LACK may not forget what we have!

WE BLESS THEE for the warming quality of Spring: for green grass, budding trees and longer days; for parks and paths and bicycles, and for all the scents and colors that edge us each day toward the days of Summer...

AND WE THANK THEE for the interflow of ideas, for the sharing of convictions, for man's ability to receive and to infuse hope, and the lifting play of Divine Truth on the human spirit.

OUR HIGHEST PRAISE we reserve for YOU - our God - whose mercy is the same from age to age, and whose life-giving grace has been declared and revealed to us in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

CENTER OUR far-ranging lives in YOUR eternal love, O God, that in whatever time or circumstance in this city we may know and feel and celebrate Your PRESECNE, Your POWER, and YOUR PEACE.

TO LOOK at us as we sit here this morning, Lord, it would appear that our grip on life is firm and that we're managing things quite well, that we have come to terms with our fears, our failures, our frustrations....

AND YET, in our eyes as in Your sight, we are not the masters of our fate that we so often pretend to be.

LORD, we are anxious, deeply anxious about the well-being of our loved ones - children, parents and grandparents. Our jobs, our wives, our husbands, our health. We worry, too, about...

THE NUMBER and the power of our sins and the tug of these temptations with which we constantly wrestle behind closed doors.

AND SO IN THIS HOUR OF PRAYER THIS MORNING, show us each once again the connection between our anxious, restless minds and our lack of faith in YOU.

MAKE REAL in us the glorious, risen life that Jesus brought, lest the cares of either self or society rob us of the joy of life.

AND ANXIOUS though we be about the long view, help us to take without fear the short step immediately before us, knowing that of such the story of life is so often written. All this we now dare to pray in the name and spirit of Christ.

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Our text is also suggesting to us that our lives are about bearing fruit and the closer we are to Jesus, the more we will want to do those things that are pleasing in His sight. After all, what good is a branch on which there is no fruit. But remember this: bearing fruit does take effort.

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