

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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I had just been dating my, now, spouse for a few months when he invited me to dinner with his family at their house. This seemed odd to me, because in other relationships that I had been a part of and knew of- I thought meeting parents and family was for when you had been dating for a really long time and were really, really serious. But we had just been dating for a few months...Now, I understand that meeting his family, was for him, meeting a part of him.

My idea that getting to know one another was *just* about US two individuals until we were ready for some bigger step- just didn't fit into what he was used to. For him and for many in the Mexican and Latin American context, family, *la familia*, was part of the package- you got to know the most important people in his life at the same time you get to know him, the individual.

These past few weeks especially I've been aware of this intimate connection. We ARE all that we are because of the people who have formed us, invested in us, taught us, showed us the way. To think we have the jobs we do, or the life we do, or the identity we do without the influence and impact of others... is FALSE.

In the Western world, we tend to see ourselves as alone. We live and love at a distance. We think dependency (and even interdependence) as a weakness. We

think any individual, if they try hard enough, they can succeed in life all by themselves.

But unfortunately, this mindset has led us to not just disconnection, but isolation, loneliness, which can lead to things that do great damage to us. Former Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murphy, in his book “Together” writes that loneliness can lead to alcohol and drug addiction, to violence, to depression and anxiety.

Now Jesus’ society in the first century Palestine, was probably less like our highly individualized context and more like my husband’s context where personal identity is intricately connected to the family and other kinship ties.

But this doesn’t mean that they too didn’t struggle with staying connected with one another and Christ in the midst of difficulty. Scholars say that there was most likely great diversity in this Johannine community - the folks that the author of John was writing to. They most likely represented diverse social, historical, and theological backgrounds and may have included folks with Jewish, Samaritan and Gentile origins - people coming from very different places and worldviews (JANT 171).<sup>1</sup>

The author places such an emphasis on unity and mutual love throughout the Gospel, not because this was something the community was great at---- but the opposite.... This was something they struggled with.... And Jesus was worried that they would *keep* struggling with it even after his approaching death.

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<sup>1</sup> Adele Reinhartz, “The Gospel According to John,” in the Jewish Annotated New Testament, 2nd ed, editors Amy Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford University Press, USA, 2017) 171.

These words of Jesus were meant to be heard by a community that *does not* have it all together. They may have had some individuals, or branches, that thought that they could survive and *grow on their own*- away from the nurturing source of life- the vine. There may have been members that felt the differences or the distance in life experiences in their community were too great, too hard, too burdensome, too much to overcome.

But Jesus promises them: “I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” This is not a threat at expulsion or demand, but a reminder and a promise! Jesus reminds them that through him, through Christ, they ALREADY are beloved members of the community, beloved branches. He reminds them of the life-giving source that they ALREADY have access to.

Even though the disciples and the other first listeners of this gospel may *feel* far removed from the other branches, Christ reminds them that they are *already* bound up in this community- each branch a part of the whole. They may come from different places, have different languages or dialects, be coming with prejudices and preconceived notions about the other groups. But each branch is a part of the larger community of branches- the vine! Their lives are bound up with one another whether they like it or not.

Cutting themselves off from Christ and from others in this Christ-following family will not end well... It's just not possible to thrive for very long without Christ and without one another.

Christ promises much fruit being a part of this network, or family, of branches, being part of the family of Christ. Fruit like **resilience** in the face of difficulty and adversity. **Cohesion** in the midst of a culture that wants to separate and individuate. **Outgrowths** extending way beyond what they could have imagined.

I don't know about you, but I am not too familiar with vines or vineyards. But I can relate to the metaphor of family- whether birth family, adopted family or chosen family- the point here is that we as Christians are family. We are given to one another through baptism- and gained a new member just this morning, here today!

As humans we're not meant to be lone-rangers- but *especially* as Christians, we are *MEANT* for connection to Christ and to our family in Christ.

It can be hard to unlearn these "I'll do it myself" or "keep to myself" tendencies- like when I couldn't understand right away how meeting family so early on in a relationship made sense- when *even now* I resist letting others into my life in different ways- and ESPECIALLY now, during the social distancing requirements of the pandemic, the barriers to connect and truly feel part of our human family, even when we WANT to, have been great.

But Dr. Vivek Murphy suggests a few strategies for those who seek to fully experience the power of connection to our human community, and I would say could extend to our Christ family as well.... He says, try devoting 15 minutes to those you love. Sounds easy- but is it? I struggle to do this with my family, much less my church family. He also says when you are with them, give them your full attention- no TV, cellphones, etc.- no multitasking! And he says, try helping and being helped.

One way you can do all three of these things here in our WPLC family is by getting involved with our upcoming listening campaign. In the upcoming weeks you will hear more and more about this campaign of listening and discernment and about all the ways can contribute and participate.

It will be a time to come together as a one family, one vine, rooted in Christ, to not only reconnect to our Christ-following community - to gather in all the branches out there on the brink of withering, perhaps also to examine aspects of our ministry that may need to be pruned so as to allowed more abundant growth... but to also ***harvest the fruits*** that have been born out of the past year - the resilience we've built in the midst of a pandemic, the cohesion we've been able to maintain with the help of God in the midst of social distancing, and the invitations we've been able to extend far and wide through our digital church ministry... and to discern together about future fruits as we continue to be rooted in Christ and rooted in community.

The good news, dear FAMILY, is that Christ is the vine, you ARE the branches. This does not rely on us. This is a fact of this moment. We are already a part of this *family of God*. Christ welcomes us to abide in him in the midst of this tangled sometimes messy community and promises fruit when we do. Let's be reminded of this today. As well as the **promise** that no distance is too great. No perceived gap or barrier is too large or complicated for Christ to still use our skills, our gifts, our life experience and to create delicious live-giving and nourishing fruit.

AMEN.