

In last Sunday's gospel reading Jesus was the good shepherd and we the sheep. Today's image expresses an even closer relationship: a vine and its branches. This is so close a relationship that you could say it is beyond relationship; it expresses identification.

*"I am the vine...you the branches."* But a vine is all branches! It is not like a tree or a big shrub where you have a substantial trunk and a profusion of branches. The vine is just branches. He has identified himself *with us*.

It is obvious that a branch cut off from the vine (or from any tree or shrub) will wither. In the case of the vine, not only is the branch destroyed but the vine itself is diminished. To destroy a branch is to affect the vine in some measure; to cut off a brother or sister in Christ is to cut off Christ.

Sometimes we sin, and the consequences can affect all of us on the vine. But some of us become so ashamed that we don't go to God anymore. We assume that because we've sinned so many times, God doesn't want to hear from us anymore. Yet to avoid God is to cut ourselves off from the very resource we desperately need and can affect so many others.

In coming to him, we find he doesn't say that whatever we do is all right. Rather, he teaches us that our *greatest* sin is leaving *because* of our sins. No, our church is a place of healing, not condemnation.

I think the issue *is* that some of us tend to separate our lives into "boxes" – either into the "church" box, or into the "world" box. And one box has nothing to do with the other.

So often our lives are divided into separate compartments into my "church" life into my *professional* "work" life, or my "entertainment life" – into separate little "boxes" that seldom touch one another and are not connected.

But Jesus is saying, "Be connected with Me, and be connected with one another. We need to be connected in all facets of life. The great Christian truth is that we are connected to someone and to something much larger than ourselves.

We are connected to the millions of people suffering from hunger, or ethnic cleansing in. We are connected to those who have died, or been wounded in the wars, and in other acts of violence.

We are connected to the children in the world who suffer abuse and neglect. We are connected to all non-Christians in the world, and all other Christians who worship the One and same God as we do but believe and worship in different ways.

To remain in Christ is to remain in one another. We are all connected in one way or another. I see that this pops up at times to remind me.

+I was at MCV visiting one of our parishioners and then the nurse came in and said to me, "*Do you remember me?*" I do get that a lot and felt helpless. "Um...."

Mercifully, she answered, “I’m the daughter of Steve Stafford from Radford.” (my previous assignment) I told her she looked different from the little kid that I remembered. Through time and space, still connected.

So, we are all connected in one way or another and that the vine shows and that we need each other in this world of ours. That is the larger picture.

However, from this gospel, we are to understand that our individually lives have a purpose in this life, that fits into that larger picture. To remain or abide in Christ is *not* to be a visitor, it is even more than being a friend, it is to be at home. Yes, here is home.

Jesus says, “*Apart from me, you can do nothing.*” How many of us go through life trying to do things entirely in our own strength, never pausing to depend upon God's power?

+It is like the story of a father and son. The dad tells his son to clear the backyard of rocks. He does so, tossing one after another into a pile. But he comes upon on a rock and can’t get it up. He tries everything but eventually goes to his father about this rock.

The father says, “Did you try everything?” The son is like, “Yes!” To which his father replies, “No, there was one more way, you didn’t ask me to help you.”

Great image for all of our rocks in our lives that we *cannot be moved* on our own. We turn to the Body of Christ – all of us, to help move that rock that we cannot move on our own.

If we can think back to our hardships, how we wondered how in the world we could see through, but we did so are so much more “whole” because we trusted and endured. You might be going through this now.

To remain or abide means to trust Christ, no matter what your life may look like. There are very difficult periods in our life in which we might need that trust to get us *through it, as these* difficult periods may be the pruning of the vine.

Now, God does not cause these things like, “Today I am going to give Patrick a miserable day and see what he does with it.” God does not cause them but allows them to take place.

Every fruitful branch must *endure* hardship. It is the hope that during such hardships, we draw closer to the vine, to Christ and one another. In making our way through this can make us better persons, more reliant on Christ.

Think of dentist...No one wants to go to a dentist, but we all have to for our teeth and afterward, we are content that we went because afterward we are blessed to have our wonderful smiles. I can say this, as my dad and brother are dentists!

I think that is what separates us from the saints of this world. All of them endured great hardships, but they did not react with bitterness, but with faith. We can become bitter from hardships or find ourselves into a journey of holiness.