

**Connected to Our Roots**  
**John 15:1-8**  
**May 2, 2021**

On one of our journeys back to the home land of Scotland, I persuaded my two brothers to join me on a journey back to our roots. While recent generations of the McPhee's lived on the east coast of Scotland, their origins, I discovered, were on the west coast of Scotland on the twin islands of Colonsay and Oronsay. At low tide the smaller island of Oronsay can be reached on foot from the main island. And on Oronsay stands the ruins of the priory. Local legend has it that Oronsay was visited by Columba on his journey into exile from his native Ireland. But when he climbed to the high ground and could still see Ireland he sailed on, eventually founding the religious community on Iona. It was on Oronsay that the McPhee clan served as secretaries to the Lords of the Isles from around 1100 to the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. We were proud of the fact that our ancestors were a peaceful tribe who devoted ourselves to record keeping instead of cattle rustling. Well at least some of us did! I will never forget that emotional visit to the island of my ancestors on Colonsay and reading the names of the MacNeil's and McPhee's on the weather-beaten gravestones.

As Diane Butler Bass reminds us in her book, **Christianity for the Rest of Us**: *Contemporary Western culture is marked by a sense of dislocation, the feeling of being lost in the universe, unmoored, without direction, without hope.* One of the ways such people seek some sense of rootedness is doing precisely what we did that day by searching out our family origins.

That's one reason why the web site, **Ancestry**, is so popular today. We go on genealogical hunts in order to find a connection to roots that will make us feel more stable and secure. But as interesting as this search may be, does it really alleviate our sense of dislocation. Looking at the old, weathered gravestones that day raised for me the old question: who am I; why am I here? So old and badly weathered were their graves that it was difficult to read the names of these forgotten souls. It will be that way for us too no doubt. No, family connection is a good thing, but we surely need something deeper and

more meaningful to satisfy our basic longing for connection to our roots.

Well, the fact is that Christians have roots that go back much further back in history than these gravestones on Colonsay. We can trace our roots back to Christ. Peter tells us: **he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you (1Peter 1:3ff)**

Important as our family roots are to all of us, our roots in Christ are surely more profound and ultimately much deeper and more satisfying. Through Christ, as Paul reminds us, we are now children of Abraham by faith. As meaningful as my island visit was for me and my brothers, it is much more satisfying to know that, through faith in Christ, I am connected to father Abraham through whom the world is promised to be blessed. In him God set in motion the majestic sweep of God's rescue plan for the human family, as N.T. Wright calls it. Yes, that same family exiled from the Garden of Eden is now brought back to God through faith in Jesus Christ. Connected to this living story we have become aware that we are pilgrims and strangers on earth, as Hebrews reminds us. For as Christians we now seek a different homeland, and have a very different way of seeing life than before.

But like all God's saints, we need to keep on the path. Keeping connection is vital to our spiritual health. In our Psalm today believers are those who live like trees beside the river. From that living source the trees draw life and grow; their leaves are green and full. The poet says: **They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper. (Psalm 1:3)**

Roots need to be fed. Dead traditionalism will not feed us; what we need is a living tradition that is fed by the grand story that overarches all other family histories, and is rooted in the Gospel of Christ. To be in Christ is to be joined to a community that bows to the Lordship of Christ, and which worships with joy and praise and whose life together is shaped by the Scriptures. It can never be me and Jesus

as one often hears today. It is always my roots in community, the body of Christ, that connects me to the life-giving Spirit of Christ.

I read Bryan Stone's book, **Evangelism after Christendom**. Here is one of the things he says about the church and our rootedness in Christ: **...the truth that the church has to offer and into which it invites persons is not merely a set of creeds, doctrines... to be heard and believed or to whose authority persons are asked to consent. Rather, that truth is Christ himself, who is present to the world not as a private experience or as a theological abstraction, but in and through a community of material sharing, discipline, and reconciliation. (p.207)**

It is this spiritual connection people need today, both in our churches and in communities around our churches. This is where we need to focus our attention, how better to provide possibilities for a new generation of seekers to find home.

In our Gospel today Jesus reinforces how imperative it is for us to stay connected to the source of our spiritual life. Remember his words to us: **I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower**. He goes on to warn his disciples that if they don't remain connected to him faith will die. He says: **I am the vine, you are the branches...Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. (John 15:5ff)**

A few years after I became a Christian I stopped going to church. I wasn't really connected to any church at the time and soon found myself drifting further and further away from God. It didn't take long before I was as dead to the spiritual life as one could be. Talk about withering spiritually! I know from experience what that feels like. And what I discovered is that the journey back to faith and church can be a long and difficult one.

I'm sure that you, like me, know of many who once embraced the faith but do no longer. For a variety of reasons, they drifted gradually away from worship, and from a church community, and ultimately from a vital faith. Today many of those family members and friends are only remotely connected to faith. It would be interesting to ask

them how they feel about that faith that once was an important part of who they were. Does it make them at all feel disconnected, unmoored, and without meaning and hope? How do we keep those things down deep enough inside us so that they don't trouble us?

Jesus makes it clear that cutting ourselves off from him, or, if you like, from a community of faith, is to cut ourselves off from the source of spiritual life. He says: **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. (John 15:4ff)** Separate oneself from the community of faith where worship, fellowship and service feed our spiritual vitality. Without that connection our faith is starved and is likely to die. This is what Jesus is getting at, I suggest, in his teaching about the vine and branches.

Personally, what brought me back to faith after several years away was the day I connected again with a church community. It wasn't the building, or the minister, but rather the Christian community that formed the central influence in that decision. I owe a great deal to Christians like Grant and his wife Ellen whose vital faith was such an inspiration to me as a young Christian. And ever since those early struggles to stay with my faith, it has been, for me at least, the main source of strength and direction in my journey of faith. No matter where I have gone in my life, connection to the people of God in churches in Scotland, England and Canada, has been my source of spiritual life. Without that connection I don't believe I would be here today in church. This connection is vital, for it is the way this verse, ***abide in me as I abide in you***, is lived out.

Paul says to the Christians in Colossae: **As you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith... (Colossians 2:6,7)**

***Amen***