

## *We Are Part of a Beloved Community*

Sunday School Lesson

John 15:9-17

January 12, 2025

The author of our lesson today begins by telling us of a recurring dream he had while preparing to start a new church in the middle of the COVID pandemic. He dreamed about going to a church he did not know. Every time he went to the church, he saw people he did not recognize building something. When he finally inquired about what they were building, this was the reply, "We're building a porch so we can sit together."

In the book *Out on the Porch*, author Reynolds Price wrote:

"In the evenings, as the outdoor air provided a cool alternative to the stuffy indoor temperatures, the entire family would move to the front porch. The children might play in the front yard or the friendly confines of the neighborhood, while the parents rocked in their chairs, dismissing the arduous labors and tasks of the day into relaxation and comfort. Stories might be told, advice garnered, or songs sung. Whatever the traditions and manners of the family might be offered in this setting. What the family room or TV room of post-World War II America would become, existed first as the front porch."

Chances are you remember the days before air-conditioning. You likely remember sitting out on the porch or the patio in the late afternoon because it was just too hot to sit indoors. Maybe you had a fan blowing or perhaps you caught a cool breeze from time to time. Porches were gathering places in the neighborhood. Last Sunday, my sermon spoke of the rising anxiety in society and much of that comes from the isolation many people feel these days. Disconnection and anxiety leads to negative emotions and feelings that can be easily become connected resentments of others.

While many civic and religious organizations have experienced declining attendance, the church is still one of the most effective ways to connect and build community, especially when the church knows who it is, understands its "why", and is fully committed to bear good fruit in relation to its gifts.

Let us pray

**O Holy God, transform our lives as we follow you. Give us eyes to see and ears to hear and most of all, hearts that do not judge. Amen.**

Our Purpose Statement: **To build Christ's beloved community around us.**

In the book of Matthew, Jesus is criticized by religious authorities for being a friend to tax-collectors and sinners. You do not find such criticism in the Gospel of John. In John, the word friend (philo) occurs six times. There is the "friend of the bridegroom" in 3:29, Jesus calls Lazarus a "friend" in 11:11, the good shepherd "lays his life down for his friends" in 10:11, and in this chapter, Jesus elevates his disciples to friends rather than

servants. In the 19<sup>th</sup> chapter, the crowd tells Pilate he is “no friend of the emperor” if he releases Jesus.

Closely tied to friendship are John’s references to love (phileo). John often refers to himself as the “disciple that Jesus loved.” So it is important to understand where this particular passage in its context. It is part of Jesus’ farewell address to his disciples. Jesus has told them what will happen but they are either in deep denial or just have not understood due to their own ambitions. This passage is preceded by Jesus comparing discipleship to being a branch on a vine. The purpose of the branch (and our discipleship) is to bear good fruit. The only way you will bear fruit is to have a healthy connection to the vine. If you cut yourself off, you will not only lose what is needed to bear fruit, you will also lose the spirit to keep you alive.

Our reading today tells of the importance of remaining connected to Jesus and to one another. Love is what connects us and through that connection we exchange joy, peace, hope, and faith. When we work together with Jesus, we bear fruit by leading others to Jesus, by alleviating suffering, by easing loneliness, and by giving hope to a world that so needs it. Christianity is a community-based faith. It is in community that we learn, grow, and serve. Your Sunday School Class, small group, Bible study, or choir that meets once a week keeps you attached to the vine. They are the ones who show up at the hospital, bring you food when you are sick, and send your cards on your birthday.

When we selected leadership for 2025, we put a stipulation that all leaders must be a part of some class. Why? It is so they are connected fully to the body of Christ that we know as our church. It is so they are studying scripture, growing in their faith, and supporting our “why”.

## **Why**

In 2009, Simon Sinek wrote a best-selling book entitled *Start with Why*. He followed it up with a companion book in 2017, *Find Your Why*. Sinek believes that fulfillment is a right and not a privilege. He believes we are all entitled to feel fulfilled by the work we do, to wake up feeling inspired to go to work, to feel safe when we are there, and to return home with a sense that we contributed to something larger than ourselves. When a church understands its why, we can create a community that draws us all closer to Jesus and each other while bearing fruit that brings us joy and makes the world a better place.

Sometimes when the community changes, our why must also change. The clearer our why becomes to everyone, the more open we are to listening to the Holy Spirit and following where it leads. Our church definitely knows its “why” and thanks to you, we are bearing fruit!

**O Holy God, thank you for your amazing journey we are taking together to make disciples and bear fruit. Fill us with your Spirit, your Love, and your passion for serving others. Amen.**