

**MEMBERS OF THE CHURCH**  
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May 10, 2009  
Fifth Sunday in Easter  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

**John 15:1-8**

"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."

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This week we all made the national headlines. Did you see it? *Churchgoers more likely to support torture*. Thank you very much! It's not the kind of headline you like to see if you're a churchgoer. But there it was and here we are. Caught red-handed. We can't hide. For whatever else we may think of ourselves we are in church this morning and thus are known as *churchgoers*.

Of course we'd like to know *which* churchgoers for there are many different types. And, by the way, when will we see the headline: *churchgoers more likely to feed the hungry and help the poor*. Even though it is true, don't hold your breath waiting for that headline.

This morning we welcomed several new members who stood before us and professed their commitment to renounce evil and follow Christ. These new members are now eligible to be called *hypocrites*. For, you see, not until you *profess* something can you be accused of hypocrisy. Those who profess nothing are safe.

It's like marriage. A couple may live together unmarried and enjoy all the benefits and liabilities of an intimate relationship but not until they stand before family and friends and publicly profess fidelity to each other in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, can they be accused of infidelity and hypocrisy in the third degree.

One way to forestall accusations of hypocrisy is by refusing to be called a Christian. This idea came to me in October 2001 when Paula and I were in Nairobi. Our Kenyan church hosts warned us that in the wake of 911 and what President Bush initially called a "crusade against Islam," Christians were at risk from militant Muslims. It was unlikely but still I was prepared. If we were taken hostage and asked if we were Christians I would say: Heck, no! We're not Christians; we're Presbyterians.

In that moment of confusion as our captors checked their religious encyclopedia we would escape. At the time I thought of it as a joke but since then I've come to like that answer more and more. After all, "Christian" literally means *Christ-one*, one who is like Christ. So, I say, let others call you a Christian. It's hard enough being a good Presbyterian.

Now, of course, you can't be a Presbyterian without being linked to Christianity, which means that sooner or later you have to come to terms with Jesus. Which brings us to the gospel lesson before us this morning.

*I am the vine. You are the branches.*

Notice: the church is not the vine. Jesus is the vine. In the wake of Jesus' life, death and resurrection many churches arose. Some have claimed to be the one and only church. The European Catholic Church, for instance, had the audacity at one time to declare: "outside the church—meaning outside that *particular* church—there is no salvation." Other churches have made similar claims.

Presbyterians are fortunate in this regard. John Calvin, a 16th century, dissident French Catholic, and the founder of our tradition, made it clear: we are but one small branch of a very large tree. He could have said vine.

Church is important. But church is not God.

Going to church even a good one is not enough. Just as sitting in an aquarium one hour a week doesn't make you a fish, so sitting in church one hour a week doesn't make you a Christian. Being in church is important, but it is not sufficient in and of itself.

Being a member of a church is both ordinary and extraordinary. It's something like marriage, which is to say, being a member the church is something of a mystery.

Through the making of a marriage covenant, we promise to be with one other finite person come hell or high water. In making a covenant with a congregation, we promise to be with a finite number of persons. In so many words we say: for the foreseeable future these are my people. This is my tribe. These are my elders. This is my pastor. This is my long house.

As members of the church we pledge ourselves to *intentionally*—and that's the key word—to *intentionally* cultivate love for God, for others, for ourselves, and for the world. That can't happen in the abstract. So we form habits of being with one another in large assemblies like this and in smaller gatherings as well.

We come to church to be with our tribe and make sure it doesn't act tribalistic, exclusive and self-serving. We come to church to be with our people even when we don't like some of them. A covenant—not blood or affection—keeps us together.

Some of our youth who attend religious prep schools often say to their parents that they don't need to go to church on Sunday because they get enough of God in chapel during the week. Brandon and I try to tell them they're missing the point. It's not about getting a "God fix." It's about being with your people who made a covenant at your baptism to love and care for you. They want to see you. Besides, your mere presence brings us all a great blessing whether you know it or not.

As members of the church we pledge ourselves to intentionally cultivate deep and expansive love. And so our men occasionally build a ramp at a member's home to make the way in a little less difficult. Our women knit prayer shawls for the grieving and carry meals to homes. Our youth visit Washington and urge our congressional delegation to pass the Wilderness Act in order to preserve more wilderness in West Virginia. And we all, as the occasions arise, rebuke friends, fellow students, and neighbors who speak unkindly or cruelly of minorities, including homosexuals. And thus we bear witness to Christ, our beloved Teacher.

Being a member of a church is like being a member of a body. The body is an organism not a machine. Members are not replaceable parts in a machine. Each member brings distinctive gifts to the body.

For a body to be healthy each cell, each tissue, each organ must be healthy in its own way. And when it comes to being a healthy member of the Body of Christ that means growing in love. The body is comprised of organisms within organisms within organisms. All interdependent on the others. So when one Presbyterian congregation is healthy the whole body of Christ rejoices. And thus it goes. Organisms within organisms within the Body of Christ. Life is one. The Church is one.

The Presbyterian Church is linked through Jesus to Judaism, an ancient tradition of wisdom. At the heart of that wisdom tradition are three basic convictions. One: the world is good. Two: We mess up. And three: by God's grace we can be forgiven, transformed, equipped and empowered to bear the beams of love, to bear the promise

discovered long ago in the heart of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, the promise that ordinary and flawed human beings can find a way to overcome survivalist, self-centered instincts and become a blessing to all families, tribes and nations of the whole earth. It's a precious but fragile promise.

That was the promise that Jesus took to heart, embodied and practiced. That is the kind of love that is stronger than death. That is the kind of love that flows through the branches as long as we stay united with each other and God. Great is Love's power!

We are part of that Body, that universal community of the Beloved. And so we come together, week after week, year after year to cultivate love, inch by inch, row by row, pew by pew, person by person, group by group, and, yes, even committee by committee. Every cell in the body—no matter how small—must radiate love in the way and in the spirit of Jesus.

During my sabbatical absence, please do not forsake this Sunday morning assembly. I'll be looking for a headline: *Shepherdstown Presbyterian churchgoers more likely to be big, bold, bodacious lovers.*