

McCabe United Methodist Church

Talking with God series, Part 1

“Found A Friend”

Sermon on John 15:1-11 (May 13 & 14, 2017)

Pastor Jenny Hallenbeck Orr

Several days ago, I was watching an episode of *The Golden Girls* when a scene began that instantly made me think of the sermon series we're starting this weekend.

In case you're unfamiliar, *The Golden Girls* is a TV sitcom that aired from 1985 to 1992. It featured four women in their “golden” years of life: three of them were widows, one was divorced. The women were roommates in a Miami home and the show was mostly about their relationships with each other.

The particular episode I watched the other day, which made me think of this sermon series, included a winter storm during which the women needed to snuggle together under an electric blanket to keep warm.

As they settled-in for the night, one of the characters – Rose, who was the ditzy Midwesterner of the group – remembered that she hadn't yet said her prayers for the day. So, she climbed out of bed, knelt on the floor, folded her hands together, and prayed. Her prayer went like this:

“Hello, God, it's me, Rose Nylund. I'm sorry to be getting in touch so late tonight – I hope I didn't wake you! Anyway, I just wanted to say I think you're still doing a terrific job. Of course, there's some things I don't understand – like poverty... and the spokesmodel category on *Star Search*... but, then again, you work your wonders in mysterious ways. A couple of years ago, on a night like this, I would have frozen to death 'cause I was by myself. Now I have Dorothy, and Blanche, and Sophia to keep me warm – not just on a cold, winter's night, but all year long. Take care of them, God...”¹

This prayer of Rose's on *The Golden Girls* is, of course, meant to inspire laughter – and perhaps a few groans – but I *loved* it when I watched it the

¹ *The Golden Girls*, season 2, episode 17: “Bedtime Story”

other day. And I loved it because, for all its relative innocence, it was just a sweet child talking with her heavenly parent.

See, that's what this sermon series we've begun this weekend is all about: talking with our heavenly parent... talking with God. And, when it comes to the importance of talking with God, there's perhaps no better Scripture reading than the one we just heard.

Today's Scripture reading from chapter 15 of John's Gospel are words of Jesus to his earliest disciples – and it comes in the midst of what Bible scholars call Jesus' "Farewell Discourse".

Jesus' words to the disciples in John chapter 15 are words he speaks to them during their last meal together. They are part of a long speech Jesus offers the disciples as a way of preparing them for the time when he will no longer be physically with them on earth. And, when he offers this speech, Jesus knows *that* time is coming quickly – thus, the reason Bible scholars call it his "Farewell Discourse".

(It's graduation season, so we could just as well call this speech Jesus' "Commencement Address" to his first followers. Or, with this Mother's Day weekend in mind, we could refer to it as "parental wisdom". But, I digress...)

As part of his Farewell Discourse to his first disciples, Jesus offers some gardening imagery: the image of the vine, the vinegrower, and the branches.

"My Father is the vinegrower ... 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. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing."

"My Father is the vinegrower ... 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."

My thumb is not remotely green, so I'm not one who intuitively understands gardening metaphors. But, over the course of my life, I've learned *enough* about plants to know this: most things need a little help to grow... and branches do not grow or produce fruit if their tree (or *vine*) is not healthy.

Jesus' words in John 15 are all about *relationship*: the relationship between the vinegrower and the vine... the relationship between the vine and the branches. If the relationship between any of these parties is not healthy, *fruit* will not be produced.

The word Jesus uses here to define these relationships is the word abide:

“My Father is the vinegrower ... 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.”

To “abide” is to be at home.

Have you ever referred to your house as your “humble abode”? The words *abide* and *abode* are directly connected. Your *abode* is where you are *at home*, where you rest and relax... perhaps the dwelling place of those who are closest to your heart... a place perhaps defined more by the relationships alive within it than by its physical reality.

When we got married a year-and-a-half ago, my husband, Derrick, and I received as a gift a piece of wall art that had this phrase on it: “What I love most about my home is who I share it with.”

Isn't that how our homes should be? No matter how much we love the physical house, no matter how much we love the stuff inside it, shouldn't the thing we love most about our homes be people with whom we share them – or with whom we *shared* them?

And, even if we don't feel this way about our actual houses, almost all of us have *people* who are “home” to us; people in whose presence we can simply relax because the relationship is so strong. Those people are *home* to us... we *abide* in them and they *abide* in us.

Again, Jesus said,

“My Father is the vinegrower ... 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.”

These words of Jesus from John 15 are a call to *abide* in him; these words are a call to *relationship* with him. And strong relationships require strong communication, right? As a fairly newly married person, I'm learning this lesson more poignantly *now* than I've ever had to learn it before! Strong relationships require strong communication.

Well, when it comes to a relationship with God the vinegrower – a relationship with Jesus the Vine – we have a special word for the way we communicate: the word “prayer.”

Prayer is no more complicated than that: prayer is simply the way we communicate with God. Prayer is simply the way we *talk* with God.

Rev. Adam Weber is the founding and lead pastor of Embrace Church in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Embrace is one of the fastest-growing churches, not only in The United Methodist Church, but also in the country. And I believe Adam Weber would be one of the first to tell you that growth at Embrace has come, first and foremost, through prayer.

But prayer didn't always come easily for Adam – just as it so often doesn't come easily for you and me. Though he grew-up going to church, as part of a Christian family, Adam Weber's prayer life didn't start to come alive until he was in high school and a youth pastor said *this* one night during youth group...

“When talking with God, there are different ways to pray ... Sometimes you have to sing because you're so excited and thankful for what God has done. You can't hold it in; you have to sing it. Sometimes when you pray, you need to get on your knees. Because you've made a mistake and you're saying you're sorry, or you're pouring out your heart to [God]. And other times ... we can pray and talk with God just like we do with a friend. We can talk with God as if he's sitting right next to us.”²

² Weber, Adam. *Talking with God*, p. 10.

Adam Weber quotes his high school youth pastor in his new book *Talking with God*, the book that's giving shape to this sermon series. When his youth pastor said this so many years ago, it revolutionized the way Adam thought about prayer:

prayer wasn't just the same grace his family said before dinner, it wasn't the often-boring prayers that were said during worship at church... prayer was *talking with God*.

And we can talk with God the same way we talk with our closest friends. We can talk with God by simply saying what's on our minds and hearts – telling God about our day, what we're struggling with, what we're excited about, what's scaring us... the mistakes we've made, where we need help, who we're called to be and become.

We can talk with God and we can listen *to* God just like when we're spending time with our dearest human loved ones – those people with whom we *abide*.

Perhaps the best good news when it comes to our relationship with God and our relationship with Jesus – our heavenly vinegrower and our eternal vine – perhaps the best good news when it comes to this relationship is that *God* is the one who initiates it.

Sometimes earthly relationships are tricky, right?, because we have to initiate them – and sometimes we're unsure whether or not we *should* initiate (or re-initiate) a relationship with someone here on earth. Not so with God. We never have to be unsure of God's desire to abide with us, and for us to abide with God. God *always* wants to abide with us.

In The United Methodist Church, we have a special name for this: we call it “prevenient grace,” grace that comes before our awareness of God's presence in our lives and world. *Prevenient grace* is God's initiating grace, the grace of God the vinegrower who draws us into and out of Jesus the vine.

One of my favorite passages of Scripture is Psalm 139 where the psalmist says to God,

“if was *you* who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb.”

With these words, the psalmist teaches us that our God is the eternal initiator of relationship with each and every one of us. God *always* wants to abide with us.

As Adam Weber writes in *Talking with God*, “No matter how far we are away from home, no matter how long we've been away from God's side – days, months, years, a lifetime, even if we've walked away from him, if we've been out looking for life on our own, if we haven't talked with God in years, or ever – we can still come home any time. We can still speak with him.”³ That's some amazing good news, isn't it?

Now...because this is a sermon series using a book that's designed to help us learn *how* to abide with God – how to pray – we're going to take a few minutes, right here and now, to actually talk with God.

So, remember those sheets of paper with the blueish-greenish quote bubble? It's time to grab those, along with a writing utensil.

If, for some reason, you're unable to put your hands on a writing utensil – or if you'd strongly prefer to do this exercise when you get home – that's okay.

(And, if, for some reason, you didn't get one of the quote bubble sheets, there's a stack of them on the Welcome Center table in the gathering area behind the sanctuary: feel free to pick one or more up and take them with you after worship! [*For those printing this off of the internet, there are quote bubble sheets on the last page*])

For just a minute or two, we're going to talk with God. You have perhaps noticed the instructions underneath the quote bubble on that sheet of paper... the instructions begin with two questions:

3 Ibid. p. 36.

1. "What do you say when you talk with God"
2. "What would you say right now?"

Keep in mind there are no wrong answers to those questions!

For the next minutes, or so, I want you to write in your quote bubble – or to simply pray without writing – whatever it is you'd like to say to God right now. There are some examples or "starter prayers" on the bottom of the sheet of paper:

- "God, I love you because..." or
- "Why [is this happening...]" or "Thank you for..." or
- "Where are you [in the midst of...]" or simply
- "I need you."

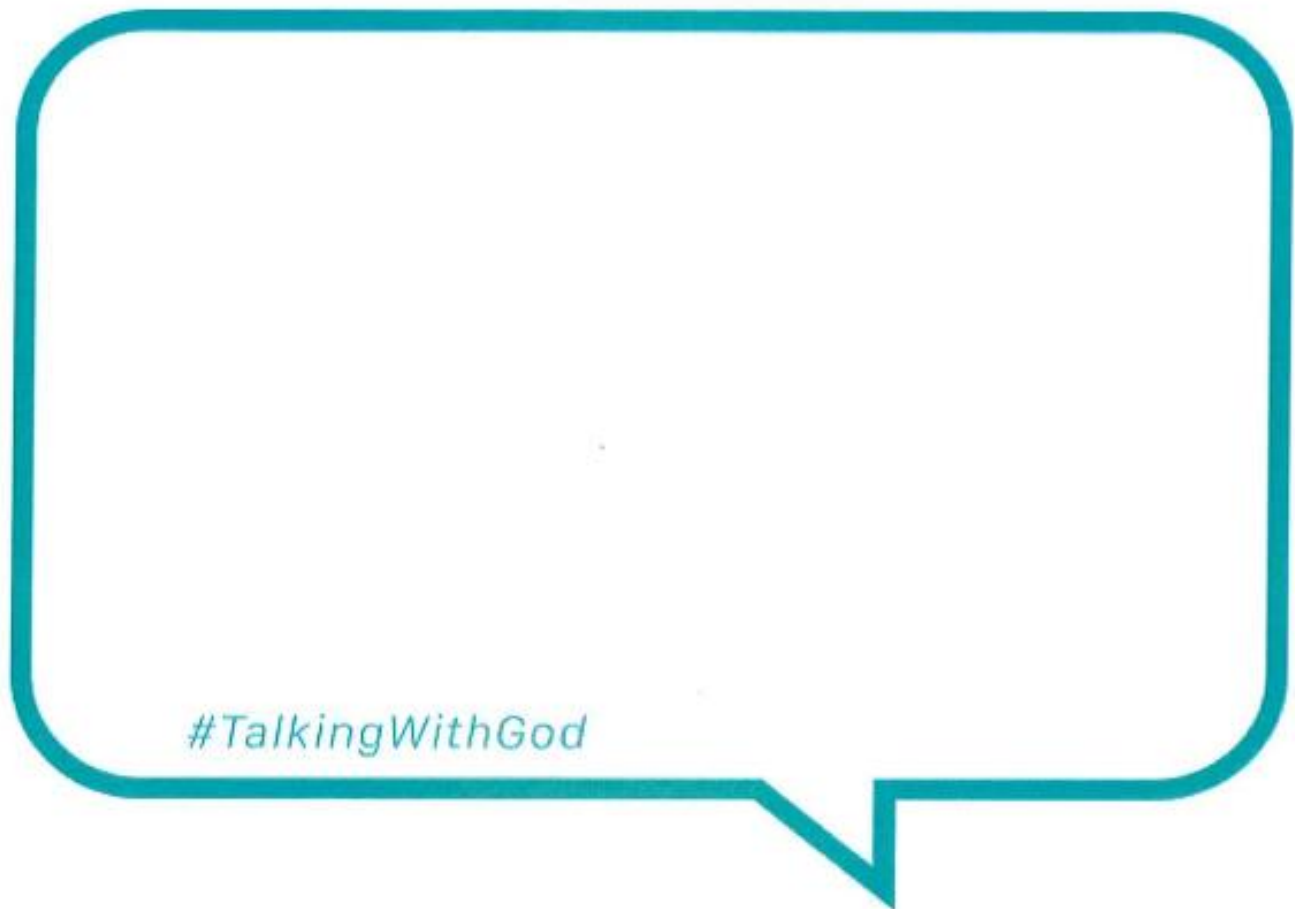
You don't have to use any of those. Perhaps you know what to say to God without any prompting.

Just in case you're wondering, we are not collecting these papers: they are conversations between you and God. You can share pictures of your prayers on social media, but that's up to you. It is my sincere hope you'll take these home with you and use them as a simple reminder of how easy it is to talk with God.

So. Let's take a minute to talk with God...if you are so inclined, write your prayers in the those quote bubbles.

With all of these prayers on our minds and hearts – all these things we've just said, either by putting the words to paper, or by lifting them quietly to God in our minds and hearts – with all of these prayers having been lifted to God, let us now, together, go to God in prayer:

God Almighty...heavenly parent...ever-present Holy Spirit...thank you for inviting us into a relationship with you. Thank you for being the one who initiates that relationship. Thank you for abiding with us and for wanting desperately to have us abide with you. May we know now and always that you love us and want a relationship with us. Like a friend, may we know we can always talk with you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.



#TalkingWithGod

WHAT DO YOU SAY WHEN YOU TALK WITH GOD?
WHAT WOULD YOU SAY RIGHT NOW?

In the quote box above, write down your answer to these questions.

Examples:

*I LOVE YOU BECAUSE...
WHY...?
THANK YOU FOR...
WHERE ARE YOU IN THE MIDST OF...?
I NEED YOU.*

If you'd like to join the social media conversation,
cut out the quote box or fold on the dotted line. Take a picture.
Share it using this hashtag: #TalkingWithGod

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