

Six Degrees of Separation
John 15:5, 7, 9, 12-14
September 15, 2019
Rev. Dr. Marcia B. Bailey, preaching

“Six degrees of separation” refers to the idea that all people are six, or fewer, social connections away from one another. The idea became a “thing” after WWI, when with increased communication, city building, technology and infrastructure, a Hungarian author named [Frigyes Karinthy](#) wrote a story called “Chains” or “Chain Links.” “The story investigated many of the problems... that would captivate future generations of mathematicians, sociologists, and physicists within the field of network theory.” Karinthy was the person who gave us the idea that we live in a “shrinking world”. In 1990, the phrase entered pop culture with the movie of the same name written by [John Guare](#). And then in 2012, two students at Albright College came up with “Six Degrees of Separation Kevin Bacon” after the movie star noted that he had done so many films he must have worked with everyone in Hollywood. So, it became a game to see if you could link yourself, in six steps, to Kevin Bacon! (Wikipedia)

While you might be familiar with that (and it is a fun game to play!), you might not be familiar with James Fowler and Nicholas Christakis’s idea of “three degrees of influence.” Eric Law describes it the third chapter of his book, *Holy Currencies*. This is the idea that “everything we do or say tends to ripple through our network, having an impact on our friends (one degree), our friends’ friends (two degrees), and even our friends’ friends’ friends (three degrees).” (Law, 18). For example, if I am having a good day and show it, it’s more likely that my friends will have a good day and that *their* friends will have a good day too! These degrees of influence are charted another way on something called the Klout Score. This measures the degrees of

influence you have based on your online presence and how many times people share what you have shared, raising your influence score each time they do. The point is that we are “connected” people and what we say and do spreads quickly and pervasively, for better or worse, perhaps without our being conscious of it. But if we can become *aware* of how our words, thoughts and actions *do* affect others, we could use that to influence those around us in healthy and life-giving ways!

Jesus gives us a clear image of how we are connected when he talks with his disciples before his death, identifying himself as the “vine” and those who follow him as “branches”. We may not have the benefit of looking at vineyards as we think about this text but most of us are connected to the natural world enough to understand the metaphor; the vine is that which is connected to the root, the source of life and nourishment. The branches, reaching out in any number of different directions at the same time, are lifeless without connection to the actual vine. “I am the vine,” Jesus says. “You are the branches.” We are one degree of separation from him and at most, two from the Source, which is God.

So, what does that mean? Jesus starts by reminding us that without him, we can do nothing. Without the vine, the branches die. This isn’t a condemnation; it’s a fact. Cut off a branch and it dies. We *need* to be connected to our Life Source and once connected to that, we can connect in fruitful ways with one another. It’s this very connection that makes us dependent on each other

Theologian Karoline Lewis writes, “At the forefront of this image is the theme of dependence. The vine needs the vine grower as much as the vine grower needs the vine. The vine needs the vine grower for its optimal growth and production, even its abundance. It will

produce more fruit, fruit in abundance, if cared for. The vine grower needs the vine to produce, to make abundance possible for sustenance and life. The mutuality assumed in this image is essential especially at this point in the story. Because it is an image that intimates profound dependence. Profound reliance. Because life is nothing without belonging, without intimacy, without relationship.” (<http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3605>)

We are created for community, to be in relationship. It is our connection to God that makes possible our connections to Jesus, which in turn creates relationships between *us*. As we begin to see each other as related in and thru Jesus, then the nature of our relationships change; “it forces us to see each other on the same level: face to face”, says Eric Law. (*Holy Currencies*, 21) And as we begin to *see* each other, when we imagine being *connected* to each other, we can begin to listen, to engage, to learn, to extend, to respect one another; we can discover that indeed, we really do *need one another*. And we begin to discover how very closely intertwined are lives really are!

One of the things we need to think about in this season of our congregational life is how to strengthen both our internal and external relationships. Rather than assume relationship via membership or longevity or belief or family relationship, what if we actively turned our focus from “*doing for others*” to “*being with others*,” both inside and outside our church? The more deeply the branches are connected to the vine the more strength and life they have! The more fruit they bear. What if our focus was not creating programs but building relationships? What would that look like?

Yesterday, Myra and Nancy, Deb and Dennis and I spent the day at the Pottstown Hospital Wellness event. We were the only church present! We gave out bookmarks and flashlight

whistles, we chatted with folks, we even left our space to visit others in order to make connections, to talk about how we might work together to serve one another and God. This coming Sat. we have another such opportunity at the Latino Festival; maybe you'd like to be there to represent us, to build relationships, to share the influence of your faith with those who are also looking for, or walking with, God. Maybe next Sunday at the congregational lunch you can sit next to someone you don't *usually* sit with instead of someone you know well. Maybe you join us at the Steel River play on Oct 6 and invite a friend! We need to deepen our connections; we are relational people!

If we shifted our focus to relationship-building we would find ourselves with more energy to reach out to our neighborhood, invest in our town, foster our ties with other American Baptists, network with our friends scattered far and near. How do we make relationships—vine and branches kind of connections—with these others? What might we learn? How might we be changed?

Our Community Day was a great start. Some of us played games and made crafts with our neighbors. Yet others of us only spoke to those we knew. How do we continue to extend our welcome? How do we continue to discover the connections that naturally exist between us and those who live around us? Without those relationships we will never have the opportunity to hear others' experiences, to know what matters to them, to discover their gifts, to engage their ideas.

Next Sunday we have the opportunity to meet and hear Rev. Dr. James McJunkin, Executive Minister of the Philadelphia Baptist Association (PBA); he will preach and to talk with us about their mission. PBA is our sister region in American Baptist life. Here is a possibility of a new

relationship with people who do, and don't, think, look and sound like us. What do we have to learn? What can we share? Vine and branches everywhere! It's all about reaching out beyond ourselves; it's about spreading the influence of love, justice making, friendship and welcome.. It's about making relationships that stimulate and support new life.

It is this idea of both "stimulating and supporting new life" that Jesus seems to point to when he emphasizes the need for us to "abide." Jesus uses that word multiple times in just a few sentences. "Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit..." "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." "...abide in my love." "Abiding" has something to do with "continuing in place", "remaining stable."

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/abide>) How do we, this time of change both as a worshipping community of faith and as a society, "continue in place?" I think it clearly has to do with being connected! When I "abide" in God I am in close relationship, I am attentive to the Spirit's movement in my life, I am spending time with and in God, deepening my relationship with God, just as I do with my friends. "Abiding" in Jesus is about building and maintaining a relationship. Staying close, being genuinely connected. *That's* what keeps relationships alive and growing. *That's* what keeps us in living relationship to the vine.

These types of relationships require our intentionality, our effort and our time. Although there is a glut of ways we can be connected to one another, we are, sadly, losing the *quality* of our relationships. We have phones within reach much of the time; we have access to internet and tools such as Facebook and Instagram, LinkedIn and Twitter. And yet, we live in a society where isolation and depression is rampant. We may be "connected" but we are not in relationship; we don't share any life-giving force. Investing in meaningful relationships with

others requires time, energy and effort. It's sometimes hard work but it's the only thing that keeps us living and growing. Without the vine, the branch is dead.

And it's that life-giving force, relationship with the branch and the Vine, the Vine and the Vine Grower, that is where meaningful relationships start. It's what promises abundant life; it's what produces luscious fruit. Join us in thinking about how we build relationships here and in the wider world, abiding in Jesus and trusting God to bear fruit.