



The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC
Aurora Illinois

Unfinished Faith for an Unfinished World

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Christianity - John 15.1-11

I am the true vine, and God is the vine grower. God removes every branch in me that bears no fruit and every branch that bears fruit is pruned to make it bear more fruit. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it is attached to 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. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept God's commandments and abide in God's love. I have said these things so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

Hindu - Bhagavad-Gita 9.4-8

*I permeate all the universe
in my unmanifest form.
All beings exist within me,
yet I am so inconceivably*

*vast, so beyond existence,
that though they are brought forth
and sustained by my limitless power,
I am not confined within them.*

*Just as the all-moving wind
wherever it goes, always
remains in the vastness of space,
all beings remain within me.*

*They are gathered back into my womb
at the end of the cosmic cycle—
a hundred fifty thousand
billion of your earthly years—*

*and as a new cycle begins
I send them forth once again,
pouring from my abundance
the myriad forms of life.*

We live in an unfinished world, a world still evolving in its physical, emotional and spiritual expression. An unfinished world requires an unfinished faith, a faith that is willing to explore, to adjust, to grow with our expanding knowledge and experience of the universe. A faith for the future must be a faith willing to build the bridge as we walk on it. It is always a work in progress the end of which will never be known.

But in this unfinished world, there is Something beyond the human realm to which we are all attached. Call it God, call it Goddess, call it Love, call it Spirit, call it Holy Force. The name doesn't really matter but the recognition that we are all connected to something or someone that transcends our own consciousness is vital to our well-being, individually and as a human race. Like a branch attached to the central vine, our ability to be productive and joyous depends on our connection to that which sustains us, that which connects us, that which roots us. This unseen vine is dynamic and growing, not static or dormant, requiring a faith willing to grow with the vine that supports it.

Jewish theologian Rabbi Abraham Heschel has said:

Religion [has] declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion, its message becomes meaningless.

All too often the church has dogmatically proclaimed that "God said" when we should be proclaiming that "God is saying." If we believe that the vine that sustains us, the God in whom we live and have our being, is living, not encased in stone or dead wood, then we believe that God is still speaking and our faith is still evolving. If we believe that the world was **completed** at the time of creation, then we will understand God differently than if we believe that the world is still evolving. If we believe the Bible to be the final and complete and only word of God, then we are ensconced only in what God said then. If we believe, however, that the world is still in the process of becoming, then we can find our place as branches attached to a still-growing vine.

When Dr. Allen Stockdale addressed the National Association of Manufacturers some years ago, this is the way he summed it up:

When God created the earth,
God left the electricity in the clouds, and energy locked up in plutonium.
God left chromosomes without a map and healing drugs hidden in unrefined chemicals.
God left all the poems unwritten, all the music unsung; all the architecture undesigned; all the graphic lines undrawn.
God left the prairie unplowed; cities unbuilt; and computers undreamed.
God gave us the challenge of raw materials; not the satisfaction of perfect, finished things.

Life gives us the wonderful opportunity to be co-creators with God, branches attached to the divine vine with the ability to produce fruit in keeping with our individual gifts. Every accomplishment we achieve is done through the power given us from that which transcends human understanding. Even the things we can brag about accomplishing through the sweat of our brow, our ingenuity, our savvy and our resourcefulness are all from beyond us. Our abilities are gifts. The culture into which we were born is a gift. The opportunity and energy to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps is a gift. Our

ability to overcome insurmountable obstacles is a gift. The intellect we use to achieve is a gift; and the ability to capitalize on our intellect is a gift as well. We did not create these; we inherited them from that which is beyond us. There is nothing we have that we could have if we were not attached to that something or someone beyond the universe that holds us in its energy while giving us the ability to branch out on our own.

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The conundrum that often trips us up is our incessant obsession with purpose. Among all the animal and plant species, humans alone get bogged down in our pursuit of the meaning of life, the purpose of our existence. Indeed, a sense of consciousness and purpose is one of the beautiful gifts we are given as humans, but it becomes a weight upon our shoulders when we spend our time worrying about our purpose in life at the expense of enjoying its beauty. Life is to be enjoyed in all of its abundance and, when tragic, endured to the best of our ability.

Jesuit scientist-mystic-theologian Teilhard de Chardin, reminds us that the world is incomplete, that the cosmos continues to evolve, and in that evolution, beauty is being created and sustained each day, in each moment. In this incompleteness, out of this nothingness a world rich in beauty and consciousness is awakened. If the cosmos is an unfinished story, it is also a story that at least until now has shown itself to possess a fathomless reserve of creativity. It has not only been winning the war against nothingness, but in its emergent beauty, feeling, and thought, it has triumphed.

The lilies of the field nor the birds of the air worry about life, Jesus reminded us. By their very being, attached to the same vine that sustains all living things, they are beauty. Warblers don't spend their day deciding if they have purpose or not; they spend their day being warblers, providing us with beautiful music and procreating their species for future generations of humans to enjoy. They will continue even if there are no humans to admire them; it is their destiny to bring beauty to the world even if not recognized. Your dog or your cat doesn't fret during the day if it is serving a purpose; it serves its purpose just by being there when you come home and need a comforting nuzzle or a warm purr. The flowers and vegetables we have just planted this spring aren't concerned about purpose; yet each day we take delight in their growth, their beauty and their ability to sustain life.

We come today to be part of the beauty of life, to be refreshed in our understanding of life, to connect with one another in our continued journey in life, to commune with fellow travelers and to commune with God for no other purpose than to revel in the beauty that this moment is. We come here to rediscover our gifts, keep them connected to the source of our life, and use them to create new things out of raw materials. The fruit of the vine, which we will drink together, reminds us of the importance of both our connectedness and our interdependence. Each of us offers something uniquely different to one another and our world; at the same time, we are each connected to the same vine, producing different results from the same source of nourishment, branching out in a myriad ways from the same holy center. Here we are affirmed and nourished as creators with God of an unfinished world.

We are here not to finish the world but to do our part in creating beauty within it. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann