

Plug in to Power

John 15:5, 7-17

When Norris Dam was first built in the hills of East Tennessee, a worker on the night shift noticed something that seemed rather strange. He could hear the great dynamos humming powerfully in the quite of the night, generating incredible amounts of electricity. But when he looked across the lake, he noticed that every cabin in sight was lighted not by electrical energy, but by kerosene lamps.

When he asked why this was, he was told that the transmission lines had not all been laid. Think about that. Those people were practically next door to this huge hydroelectric dam, but they could not receive its power because they were not plugged in.

This is analogous to many people today, isn't it? God's power is available. God's strength is accessible. God's presence is nearer than breathing, but how many are connected to it? How many live so close to the power source but are not plugged in?

Last Sunday, Pastor Eric challenged us with words from Scripture that declare, **"Whoever does not love does not know God."** Today I want to pick up on that and talk about being connected to God as a means to becoming more loving. Whoever does not have the energy to love simply needs to plug in to power.

Now they didn't have electric plants in Jesus' day. Jesus says that he is the vine. We are the branches. Jesus provides what we need in order to produce fruit, and the fruit he describes in today's scripture is love.

Jesus describes this love in four ways. First of all, he talks about love as a commandment. This kind of idea no doubt seems surprising in our time. We tend to think about love as a feeling or emotion. We often talk about having "fallen in love." We've heard pop songs about love having found someone. If someone "looses that loving feeling," it is often regarded as sufficient reason to think about separation from his or her partner.

But Jesus isn't just talking about feelings. He is talking about love that always looks to the best interest of the other. Sometimes those intense feelings are present. Sometimes they are not. Nevertheless, we are commanded to love.

Scholar and author, William Willimon, tells the story of an elderly man grieving over the death of his teenage grandson. He had been shot in a robbery of the family grocery store. A

reporter asked him if he wanted revenge. He said no. Why not? The man replied that he could not because he was a Christian.

The grandfather was right. A Christian is commanded to do what is in the best interest of the neighbor in every situation. It's not too late for repentance. Criminal justice? Sure? Personal vengeance? No. It doesn't make a difference whether we feel like doing it. Jesus teaches us that love is a decision. It may seem hard if not impossible, but that's our commandment.

Jesus' second point about love is that this kind of love is going to produce joy. He says, **“I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”** Again, this may seem like a struggle for us Christians. We tend to think that competition and victory is how we achieve joy.

I'm sure some of you listen to “All Things Considered” on National Public Radio. A man named Jim Roberts, a family therapist in Kansas City, was interviewed and told an inspiring story. He was invited to visit the fourth grade classroom of his son. That day one of the teachers was organizing a balloon stomp for all of the classes. In a balloon stomp, each child ties a balloon to his or her ankle, and the objective is to pop the balloons of others while protecting your own. Only one person can have the joy of winning. When the teacher gave the signal, the war began. Each child tried to stomp on other balloons while guarding their own, and there was one victor.

Then another group was brought in for the balloon stomp. It was a group of mentally handicapped students. Jim says that his heart sank when he saw them. Being a therapist, he was afraid of what a game like this might do to them. When the signal was given to start stomping, they seemed to have no idea what to do. It was clear that they had missed the spirit of the game. Each child went about offering his or her balloon for stomping. In fact, one girl carefully held hers in place so that a friend could stomp on it. He then did the same for her. When all the balloons were gone, the whole group cheered in unison. They transformed a competitive game into a cooperative one. In the process, each one became a winner.

Are we looking for joy? Jesus says that we aren't going to find it in the kind of competition our society often encourages. We will find it only in love. We will find it only in looking to best interest of one another.

Then Jesus makes a third comment about the kind of love he desires from us. He calls it friendship, and he lifts up his own life as a symbol of what real friendship is. He describes

friendship as sacrificial. He says, **“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”** That is, of course, what Jesus has done for us, and we lift it up and remember it every time we celebrate Holy Communion.

While none of us have literally laid down our lives for someone, we have often offered ourselves, as the apostle Paul would say, as living sacrifices. If you’ve ever wondered what’s going through my mind at the beginning of worship when I and Pastor Eric and the liturgist pause at the altar, I always imagine myself offering my life before God’s altar on behalf of my friends. By God’s grace, my life returns to me with the commandment to love. Living sacrifice. Whatever your ministry may be, it must be that you have sacrificed one life for a life of discipleship. It must be that you have given something up for yourself in order to be a blessing to others.

There is a beautiful legend about a king who decided to set aside a special day to honor his greatest subject. When the big day arrived, there was a huge gathering in the palace courtyard. Four finalists were brought forward, and from these four, the king would select a winner.

The first person presented was a wealthy philanthropist. The king was told that this man was highly deserving of this honor because of his humanitarian efforts. He had given much of his wealth to the poor.

The second person was a well-known physician. The king was told that the doctor was deserving because he had rendered faithful and dedicated service to the sick for many years.

The third person was a distinguished judge. The king was informed that he was worthy because he was noted for his wisdom, his fairness, and his brilliant decisions.

The fourth person presented was an elderly woman. Everyone was quite surprised to see her there. She wasn’t dressed real well and her manner was rather unrefined. She hardly looked the part of someone who would be honored as the greatest subject in the kingdom. What could she possibly have, compared to the other three, who have accomplished so much? Even so, there was something about her—the look of love on her face, the understanding in her eyes, her quite confidence.

The king was intrigued and somewhat puzzled by her presence. He asked her who she was. She said, “Do you see the philanthropist, the doctor, and the judge? Well, I was their teacher!”

The woman had no wealth, no fortune, and no big title, but she had given her life to raise up great people. This is just one of many silent heroes who teach us about sacrificial friendship.

Jesus also says that real friendship is characterized by an openness toward one another. He tells his disciple that he has opened his heart to them and made known all that the Father has made known to him. Likewise, we are called to open our hearts to one another, to share our hurts and our hopes. He asks us to give up hiding and being self protective because we are afraid of how others will respond.

One of the blessings of being a pastor is that you are invited to walk with people on life's journey. People do open up their hearts, and I feel that it is a great gift to be a faithful steward of someone's story. Those moments of sharing are sacred. And I hope that you have those moments with one another as well. This is how God calls us to be a community. We sometimes think we know people because we see them in church. We recognize their face and know their name, and we say, "Sure, I know that person. He or she goes to my church." We really get to know one another as we open up and walk together on our common Christian journey.

Then Jesus makes a final comment about love, but perhaps it's the most important of all. He says that we can't pull this off on our own. He tells us where we can find the power we need to love in this way. He says, "**I chose you.**" That is what I think really stands out. Jesus chose us. We are precious to him. We are his disciples, and we are his friends. His love is steadfast, and when we plug into him, we never have to worry about a power failure. The power doesn't go out in the middle of a storm. We don't have a bill to pay in order to maintain service. We simply choose to plug in.

When I first came to Bethlehem United Church of Christ, I learned that the old parsonage is the space where the youth meet. I learned that it's called the "Outlet." When I first heard that name I thought it meant that it was a place where youth could gather and let it all out. It's a social and emotional outlet. And that's a good thing. Youth, just like anyone else, need to be able to gather in a place where they can simply be themselves. They need a place where they can reflect freely about experiences at school, in athletics, in music, at home, in life. There is no pressure to be someone they're not. It's a safe outlet.

I was educated by members who informed me that the name "Outlet" means even more than that. It's a place to be plugged into Christ. It's a source of power. It's a place to become energized and filled with the good things that enable young people to make good choices.

When I reflect theologically about our building proposal, the thing that excites me most is the plan to bring the youth space into the main building. It is the most significant outlet installation that could happen. You could think of it as a wiring update. Young people would be able to plug into power while surrounded by the unity of this congregation. What a significant witness! Indeed, the entire place becomes, in a sense, one big outlet.

Jesus is the power source. We are the electric motors. Jesus provides the power we need in order to work. Jesus himself says that he is the vine and we are the branches. Being connected to him enables us to bear fruit.

Those among us who are now graduating from high school have an entire adult life ahead of them. It's a new frontier—somewhat mysterious. There are many notions of what it means to be successful on such a journey. It may be having a rewarding career, a strong family, some new achievements.

My definition of success is quite simple. Success is discovering God's desire for your life and following it. In order to do that, plug into power. Find the power to make good and right decisions about vocation and family planning. Find the power to love new friends and old friends. Find the power to continue knowing and loving God no matter what events unfold on the journey.

Plug into power. The power source is so close. In God we live and move and have our being. Whether we live, however we live, we are God's now and forevermore. Amen.