

1 John 4:7-12 May 10, 2009
John 15:1-8 "Hanging On"

Over the years I've met a lot of people who struggle through life. You'd be surprised at how many, rich and poor, rural and urban, educated and not, struggle to hang on. You know the expression, "I'm hangin' in there." Or "If I can just hang on a little longer, then..."

This is Mother's Day, and mothers know about hangin' in there. How much motherly patience was expended to get these kids together for today's performance of "Donkey Tales?" Maybe moms can identify with the donkey – you know, a beast of burden. Mothers are women who will spend their lives trying to burp inanimate objects and bracing themselves before opening a bedroom door. They are women who try to live normal lives. They do things like go shopping, and when a sales clerk says, "May I help you?" the mother will say, "Ask your father!"

A mother is someone who is afraid to stick her hands down in her children's pockets. And she isn't crazy about looking under beds.

You know you're a mother when you begin to understand everything the family dog says.

You know you're a mother when you have a recurring dream that you are the agitator in a washing machine and you're off balance.

You know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you're a mother when one of your top-ten fears is that there will be car-pooling in heaven.

You are surely a mother if you have actually tried to save a stitch in time but have long since given up.

A mother is someone who talks in her sleep, but no one listens.

You know you're a mother when you buy cereal based on what kind of picture is on the box and what kind of "surprise" is in the box.

You know you're a father if your wife fits any of the above descriptions.¹

A mother's role is difficult but vitally important. That's why we honor them and pray for them.

Yes, in many ways life is about hanging on, and it is crucial *what* we grab hold of; our lives depend on it. People are often tempted to hang on to some pretty slender threads. Yet life can be more than just hanging on. We were meant for living that adds value and helps others to grab hold of a sure connection.

It starts like this: love and faith are intertwined, kind of like vines, even though we don't think about it much. Love comes from God and we've seen it in Jesus Christ. But it's a type of love that does not come naturally to us. It's a

¹Sylvia Harney, EVERY TIME I GO HOME I BREAK OUT IN RELATIVES, (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, Publishers, Inc., 1990),129-130.

tough love. It's called "agape" love, which means a selfless love. It means loving even those we think don't deserve it. Now that's tough. God's love is personal, not an abstract concept. And God's love sometimes says "no" to our desires because we don't always have it right. That's tough. Finally, the love of God is not some philosophy, but concrete action. And that's tough as well. Good mothers instinctively know this about love. To love children in all circumstances can sometimes be a true test of love. And saying "no" is sometimes the most loving thing a mom can do.

Love in action is the confession of faith of those who follow Christ. Faith is an action word. It means doing an act of love even when you don't feel like it. The one with little faith says, "When I feel good, I'll do it." But the one truly connected to God will say, "When I do it, I'll feel good." That's the big difference between faith and feelings.

Many people view Christianity in terms of denial: don't do this, don't do that. A lot of "no's." What a shame, when Jesus said, "I have come that you may have life, and have it in its fullness."

Christian life is not denial but fulfillment. Don't you know this is a major part of being a Methodist? John Wesley, our founder, emphasized that God would make our whole lives something good. Salvation means wholeness. God works to make all things godly, including all our relationships. John Wesley *knew* that God could change our hearts and repair our unhealthy relationships. Do you know that? Can you allow for that? He was skeptical of any spirituality that divided life into parts. If Jesus is Lord, then he is Lord of all. That's why Wesley included "Christian Perfection" and "The Use of Money" in his standard sermons.

The full life is made possible by the Risen Christ. If you truly desire to have a full life and you're not afraid of His power to transform you, then it can happen. Christ can make a difference, a positive difference, in your life and the life of this church. That's what church is supposed to be about. If Christ doesn't make a difference, then who cares?

The Gospel of John tells us that if we want to see any difference in our lives, we have to be connected to Jesus as a branch is connected to a vine. The branch that bears no fruit is not just unproductive; it's not living! Real living is found in the vine of Christ. Are you lukewarm in your Christian faith? Do you really hang onto other vines, rather than Him? Do you need to pray to Him today to get yourself really connected?

How can we expand the love of Christ? How can we expand it to inspire others in our church and those outside church? We certainly can't do it if we don't love one another. Think of your relationships at church, at work, with your neighbors, your family. Do you regularly pray for those relationships and God to be part of them? Your neighbors? Can all the bonds of God's love be built there? Might seem tough. But don't forget you're connected to the Vine!

Here's another one: if you really want to grow more like Christ (I don't see any other reason for being in church) you need to be part of shaping the culture of this church. God didn't stay distant in heaven, but came down and lived among us in Jesus. He shared our life. Now why can't we do the same? What I mean is, we have many newcomers who visit our church. Sure we're friendly, but do we make friends? That's what we ought to do, make friends for Jesus. That means more than just a hello. It means taking the time to get acquainted, inviting them to join you over at Trinity Café; maybe joining you for a cup of coffee during the week; listening to their story; making a friend for Jesus.

When you're connected to the Vine of Christ you'll find you're doing more than just hanging on. You'll be bearing good fruit, adding value back, and your life will be happier. Now wouldn't you rather be adding to life and goodness, rather than draining?

Get yourself connected to that Vine, truly connected. Christian people have a duty to build their relationship with Christ. Connected to the vine we'll be able to build a Christian life into all our relationships. We too can bear fruit for Christ even in difficult circumstances.