

Being With

John 15:1-8

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How do you cultivate a deeper connection, a deeper relationship with God?

Ours answers to that question may depend on what Christian tradition we come from.

From what I've experienced among our Episcopalian friends, connection with God is primarily cultivated by intellectual ascent. They want to *know* more, and in knowing more *about* God, they feel more attuned *to* God.

Our Lutheran friends seem to have a particular knack for *hospitality*. To host friend and neighbor is to host the very presence of Christ. So, when they host folks for a meal, it is always an event. Here's what I mean: Back in March when it was the Lutheran pastor's turn to host our monthly clergy luncheon, we showed up to his church's front lawn to find several tables set outside with table cloths and all. Outside space heaters surrounded the seats to keep us warm. Each seat was reserved with a pastor's nameplate. The tables were elaborately decorated with St. Patrick's day decorations. And as we were wrapping up, the clover-shaped rice-crispy treats were unveiled. The only thing missing from our St. Patty's day feast on the front lawn was green beer.

While hospitality is a spiritual discipline for our Lutheran friends, among our more charismatic brothers and sisters, a vigorous prayer life seems to be the way to cultivate a deeper connection with God. They take prayer seriously.

I will never forget when one of my college friends transferred to a charismatic Christian college and took a course on the practice of prayer. At semester's end, she recalled to me with great enthusiasm how one day her professor came into the classroom, looked at the class, and she said, "Take out your Bibles and throw them on the ground."

The class looked at her stunned, but she insisted: "Throw your Bibles on the ground."

Then my friend's professor threw her own Bible on the ground, stood on it, and said, "When you pray, you stand on the word of God." She was devoutly serious, and my friend was in awe of the experience. The whole class threw their Bibles on the ground and prayed while standing on the word of God. And as she told me this, all my A-type personality could do was imagine the damage they were doing to bindings of those Bibles!

And, I don't know what it was like growing up as an American Baptist, but growing up in the Southern Baptist tradition, there was only one spiritual discipline ever mentioned. Forget fasting or meditation. The only spiritual discipline we were ever taught — and it was hammered into us — was "quiet time." In order to have a relationship with God, you had to practice a faithful "quiet time."

I have to confess to you that quiet time has never worked very well for me — and it wasn't for lack of trying. I'd set my alarm to go off in the wee dark hours of the morning. I'd grab my Bible and find a quiet spot, but before I could finish reading even a single chapter I'd be nodding off. I'd wake up later, face first in whatever passage of scripture I'd happened to be "reading." I can only hope that some of the words were absorbed through my forehead by way of osmosis.

I'm not trying to speak for you or your experience, but for me — quiet time was usually a discouraging experience. It felt like running on a treadmill — a whole lot of effort to go absolutely nowhere.

How do we cultivate a deeper, more meaningful relationship with God?

By intellectual ascent? By making clover-shaped desserts? By standing on the word of God? By falling asleep in our Bibles? Do any of these things bring us into a deeper communion with God?

In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus *demonstrates* what it means to live in union with God by his life. In John, he likes to *talk* about it.

Here, he's speaking to his disciples. They've just left the upper room where Jesus has washed the disciples feet. As they walk — and I imagine it's through a garden or even a small vineyard — Jesus says: "I am the vine and you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them will bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

The word "abide" isn't really a contemporary one, is it? I don't hear many people using "abide" in their conversations. It's an old-fashioned word. It's like Thee and Thou and Thine. It sounds like it belongs in the King James Version of the Bible, not in our modern translations. Yet there it is — not just in the older *Revised Standard Version* but even in the *New Revised Standard Version*: abide — eight times in these eight short verses.

I'm not sure it's semantically accurate, but I think of the verb "to abdicate" as the opposite of "to abide." If one abdicates their position, they leave it, they forfeit it, they part with it. Prince Harry and Meghan Markle have abdicated their royal titles. They are no longer royals with all its pomp and circumstance. Now, they are just plain old celebrity millionaires like the rest of us.

But to *abide*? To abide is to stay in a given place or relation. It's to *dwell* there, to make your home there. It's to *be present* to that relationship.

This kind of talk is all too philosophical, too ethereal, and Jesus knew it. He knew we wouldn't be able to get our heads around it if we couldn't get our hands around it, so he uses the image of a vineyard for us.

He imagines a manicured vineyard where God is busy dressing the vines, keeping them healthy, pruning what needs to be pruned and removing the parts that prevent health. He imagines himself as the vine — the primary stalk with its roots stretched into the soil and its arms reaching out to the sides. And us, his followers, he imagines as the smaller branches growing off of the vine which, in turn, bear fruit.

It is a relationship of mutuality, of interdependence. The work the vinegrower does benefits the vine, and a healthy vine produces healthy branches, which in turn produce fruit for the vinegrower.

Susan Palo Cherwien further points out that, “Just under the bark of the vine and the branches are two layers necessary for the survival of the plant: the xylem and the phloem. The xylem carries water and nutrients up from the roots, through the vine, into the branches and the leaves. The phloem carries sugars, the products of photosynthesis, through the vine, to the roots. It is a reciprocal arrangement of survival, nourishment, and fruit-bearing.

The branches lift their leaves up into the sunlight and into the air; the vine digs its roots deep into the earth and down into the water. Nourished by the vine, by water and the earth, the leaves raise their faces to the sun and [in season] the branches produce... fruit” (“Living by the Word,” *The Christian Century*, April 21, 2015).

But the thing is, in Jesus’ metaphor, the fruit is the byproduct of the abiding — of the vine and branches *being with* one another. The image isn’t meant to make us go, “Ok, how do *I* produce a bigger, better harvest? How do *I* produce more fruit? How do *I* produce sweeter fruit? How do *I* not get thrown into the fire?”

It’s not about what we do. It’s about what *can* happen *if* we abide in Christ. The great Christian mystics called it “practicing the presence,” in which they strove to cultivate a continuous awareness and openness to Christ’s presence living in us. They contend that simply by keeping our soul awake to the presence of God in the present moment, the way we live could be transformed.

There is the story of the great Christian writer, Corrie ten Boom, who many years after she got out of the concentration camp, met on the streets of Amsterdam the very guard who had tortured and imprisoned her and her family. And all of the hatred and anguish and terror arose within her as she approached him.

She was in such a situation that she had to shake his hand. She felt her hand freezing and paralyzing at her side, and saying, “How could I ever, *ever* reach out the hand of friendship to this man who caused me so much pain?”

She said, “By some grace — I don’t know where it came from — I was able to ask Jesus to love in me and through me. I knew *I*, Corrie, could not do it. As I raised my hand, the grace was given and the power went through the hand. And I was able not only to

shake his hand, but honestly and some unbelievable sense, love this suffering man” (Richard Rohr, *Collected Talks on Transformation*, vol. 1).

You see, the fruit of Christ is only possible when we abide in him. The Christian mystic, Meister Eckhart, said it like this: a plum brings forth plums not by an act of will but because it is its nature to do so.

You see, *the goal* of the spiritual life is not to produce fruit, but to be *with* Christ, so that the very nature of Christ might be in us.

The pastor and theologian, Sam Wells, says:

Imagine you’re walking through a big city and you see a homeless person. And four options come to mind:

One option is to say to yourself, “We need to get people off of the streets, into housing, employment, and a profitable use of time.” So you join an organization, you start serving on a board of a non-profit, you try to develop programs to solve the problem of homelessness. He calls this *working for* the homeless.

A second option is to speak to the homeless person, to explore with them the reasons why they’re homeless, and then to educate them on what resources are available to them. You may even offer to drive them to these places. This, he calls *working with* the homeless.

A third option is to feel a rising righteous indignation about the fact that there are so many homeless people in the most affluent country in the world. So you blog about it, denouncing the city, denouncing the situation, and denouncing the many who seem oblivious to the plight of those without homes. Wells calls this *being for* the homeless.

A fourth option is simply to sit down beside the homeless person and *be with them* – exchange names, talk about where they’re from, ask what it’s like to have to sleep outside, drink a cup of coffee with them, listen to them. This final option he calls *being with* the homeless.

He says that the problem of both the *working for* and *being for* options is that it doesn’t actually require you to have any significant kind of conversation, interaction, or relationship with a homeless person. You can do it without any relationship.

On the other hand, *working with* and *being with* both take seriously that the homeless person must be at the heart of whatever takes place. But *working with* starts by seeing *a problem*. Homelessness is a problem to be solved, and thus the homeless person is a problem first and a person second.

But the simple act of *being with* is one of seeing the person first. It’s what we do with those who need nothing from us, like our friends. We don’t go get coffee with our

friends because we want to fix them. We do it because we want to enjoy them, because we find value in their presence, because they add value to our lives simply by being in relationship with us.

Wells then says this: "Let's revisit this configuration in a theological perspective. Does God see the world as a problem to be solved or as a gift to be enjoyed? ...The incarnation presupposes that it was not enough for God to be *for* us... God's purpose is to be *with* us" ("The power of being with: Jesus' model of ministry," *The Christian Century*, June 18, 2015).

Have you ever considered that one step on the path to spiritual maturity might simply be accepting the unbelievable notion that God *wants* to *be with* you?

There is a wonderful image of just this kind of *abiding* in Psalm 131. It reads:

"O LORD, my heart is not lifted up,  
my eyes are not raised too high;  
I do not occupy myself with things  
too great and too marvelous for me.  
But like a weaned child with its mother;  
my soul is like the weaned child within me" (Psalm 131:1-2).

You can imagine us as the child in the mother's arms, the mother swaying and singing soft lullabies. The child coos and reaches up, grabbing at the mother's finger.

But why a *weaned* child? Why does the psalmist employ the image of a *weaned* child?

Because a weaned child is no longer nursing. It's no longer in its arms mother's to be fed, but simply because it *wants to be with* its mother. The weaned child doesn't have an ulterior motive. It just wants to enjoy its mother's presence, and so is at complete rest in her arms.

And we would be silly, wouldn't we, to think that the mother didn't simply want to *be with* her child, too?

Such is the image of abiding with God and God abiding with us.

Brennan Manning used to tell the story of having dinner with a Jewish Rabbi friend and his young family. He remembers fondly, as the evening wore on, the young couple's toddler climbing out of the chair and playing in the corner of the dining room as the adults continued to visit and the night wore on.

He went on to say that at some point the child, weary from the day's activity, climbed into his father's lap, rested his head against his father's breast, and played with his long, fiery-red beard until he fell asleep — at complete peace in the arms that held him. In that moment, said Manning, he saw an image of what it means to abide in God. It's

less about what we accomplish and more about the deep joy we find in sitting in the Father's lap.

How do we cultivate a deeper relationship with God?

It isn't by trying to produce more "fruit" for God, but by simply *being with* God, even if that means falling asleep in his lap, just so we can feel close.

And if that's true — if what God really wants from us is to simply *be with* us, even when we fall asleep — then maybe all those times I fell asleep in my Bible trying to practice my "quiet time" weren't such a waste, after all. Maybe God knew my heart. And maybe my desire to be with God was itself pleasing to God.

So read a book and stretch your intellectual horizons, if that is what makes you feel close to God.

Set the table and cut the rice-crispy treats into shamrocks, if that is what makes you feel close to God.

Fall asleep into your open Bible, if that is what makes you feel close to God.

God help me, stand on the word of God as you pray (though I personally prefer you do that metaphorically and not literally), if that is what helps you feel close to God.

Whatever you do, do not stop striving to be in the presence of God, because God will never cease striving to be present to you. And that, as far as I can tell, is the deepest meaning of what Jesus meant when he said, "Abide in me as I abide in you."

Amen.