

“Drawn to A Circle of Love”  
B, Easter 6; John 15:9-17  
May 6, 2018; 10:00 am  
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO  
Rev. Rebecca K. Poos

## I. CONSTANTLY ABIDING?

How are you doing with “abiding in the Vine?” How did this week go?

If you weren’t here last week: a quick recap. Jesus was just telling the disciples a few moments before today’s passage to:

“Remain in me, as I remain in you. Like a vine remains connected to its branches and the branches receive their very life from the vine.”

We pondered together: how do *we* stay connected to our Source of Life? What nourishes our root connection and life sap like the sun, water and air nourish the branches? How, individually, as well as communally, do we stay securely and enthusiastically connected to our Vine, our Sacred Center, so that we keep on bearing *good* fruit and don’t wither in the storms and dry spells of life.

True confessions. I did not abide very well. Not this week. Between computer problems and system failures of many kinds human and electronic, and miscommunications and misunderstandings, followed by not feeling heard or understood close to home and

halfway around the world, I didn’t even feel connected to myself, much less the Vine. The daily grind grinding left me feeling sad and frustrated. Plus, my Mom Self was feeling anxious about Rocky traveling home from Ecuador after his semester abroad, and getting everything decently in order for graduation, moving and launching into adult life.

Oh, and allergies! Everyone I knew, including myself, was suffering from allergies, and maybe a little touch of “full moon syndrome!”

I woke in the night many times, and my prayers seemed to go nowhere, if I was even *able* to pray. Honestly, my Vine felt distant and deaf. And I would have to be given an “F” for the Sermon Homework this week! This was abundantly clear when it hit me what the sermon last week said in that one, convicting little part:

**“If you feel far from God, guess who moved.”**

## II. ABIDING IN NATURE

Friday morning, I woke up just feeling “low in my soul.” Disconnected from the Vine. I reminded myself that starting the day by reading my daily devotional and journaling my “gratitudes” and intentions might be a good way to re-connect, and it was a good first step. How often do we know what we *should* do to reconnect with the Vine before we try to branch out, but so rarely *do* it?!

I have to say I also have Ann Condra's drawling voice in my head at these times, too, and am *so* grateful! "You've gotta let your soul catch up with you."

And then, something else besides Ann's voice floated onto my radar. It caught my eye because it sounded like the title of my sermon: "Widening the Family Circle", a reflection by theologian Tricia Gates Brown.

In that article, Rev. Brown named *exactly* what I was feeling: "Soul loneliness is disconnection from the Source." And, she named an antidote that is literally outside the window: "life intertwined with animals and nature."

I immediately knew what I needed! "Corral Therapy!" Yep, getting in the muck for me or in the mud if you're a gardener, helps us get out of the tall weeds. Communing in a wider circle, coming together with the other branches on the Vine – human and in the natural world – is the best way *ever* to connect with our own soul and Source.

In "Widening the Family Circle" Brown reminds us of something the Celtic Christians and Natives have known since the dawn of time: "Nature nourishes our bodies and souls, making us feel less lonely. We need to alter the ways we view nature and non-human species. We need to widen the

family circle of love, to be intentional about finding connection with the trees and plants and wilds, and most importantly animals.

God as immanent companion encountered in nature—under a stone, or in the eyes of a hummingbird or a dog—is wonderfully good news! Love is abundant and waiting for us—right there in nature."

"Make yourselves at home in my love," Jesus reminds us today in John 15. If you keep my commands, you'll remain intimately at home in my love."

### **III. ABIDING IN COMMUNITY**

That was Friday. And after the Fridays and the frustrations of the week, we begin looking toward Sunday! Looking forward to gathering in Worship around the Table – as we come in from working in the yard; the garden, mud and corral, and continue the communing with God and one another.

Corral Therapy, prayer and journal time, looking forward to *this* place, this moment, and being invited to lunch by a friend, lifted my spirits. It also brought a profound sense of why we do what we do as church.

### **IV. LOOKING AT OUR TABLE**

Each week for the past several months, we've been welcoming more and more to our Table at CUCC. People from a wide variety of backgrounds, walks of life, faith traditions, ages and abilities, have been drawn-in to our circle, and found a warm welcome.

Next week, on Mother's Day, as we celebrate Jesus calling us to "belong in love to one another," we will renew our covenant together as a congregation and invite new folks to covenant with us. Our "belonging in love Circle" is growing!

John Pavlovitz, in a great new book called "A Bigger Table: Building Messy, Authentic, and Hopeful Spiritual Community" urges churches everywhere to look at our circles of belonging, and ask ourselves: How is it that people are drawn in? What makes them feel welcome? And, how do we draw ever-bigger circles – not in terms of numerical growth but spiritual.

He asks us to imagine ourselves *all* as hosts. Of setting the table and sitting together and listening to each other's stories, and looking for signs of the Divine in each soul as Jesus did – practicing "radical hospitality."

He says every church in the whole world describes itself as a "friendly church." But he works with

*countless* hurting souls who were welcomed warmly in the front door and then found they weren't *really* welcome in the "come as you are" scene, or were even cast out the back door. "Truly welcoming" is a different animal from "friendly church."

There's a fun fact about Jesus that we might not have thought much about. Jesus didn't just hang out with the "cast outs"! We *forget* that Jesus practiced table fellowship with ALL parts of the spectrum. Yes, he was known to dine with the tax collectors and disenfranchised, poor and put upon. But he *also* was invited to the home of a respected Pharisee and healed the servant of a high-ranking ruler. He spoke in the synagogue with the experts and elites; was welcomed and showed welcome to the insiders.

Jesus is, "A pastor to the wide swath of humanity that crossed his path, caring for all these people with the same fervency and reverence."

When Clarke and Rocky and I moved to Buena Vista and came to this church, we were blown away by the "spectrum" that was this congregation – socially, politically and geographically. There were dedicated leaders in the Republican Women worshipping together with equally passionate workers in the Obama campaign. There were folks living in houses on top of mountains and others in "the burbs" or the tiny little cabins inherited from their grandparents.

And you know what? You couldn't tell the difference! When we came to church on Sunday mornings and worshiped and fellowshiped with each other, those who shopped at Sachs 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue and those who shopped at New-bees were *not* distinguishable.

You also couldn't tell – for awhile anyway – who were the long-timers – maybe even been born here, or came as a youth – from those who might have just retired here a couple years ago. Couldn't tell those who liked to stay close to home from the world-wide travelers.

We're all "just folks" living and loving here in this beautiful place, raising our families, caring for the community and seeking to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Can I get an Amen?

#### **V. KEEP BUILDING THE TABLE DEEP & WIDE**

We need to keep doing what we're doing. Keep setting our table, drawing the circle wide, and keep looking to Jesus' example of fellowship in a big, wide circle. And keep asking ourselves: Where can we build an even bigger, *more* welcoming table? Where can we clear the dirty dishes and set more spaces? Add a leaf? Who is missing? What branches might be added?

Our "Church on the Move" visioning event a couple weeks back was a great example of doing just that. Boards and committees do this all the time! And

asking that question: how do we engage around a bigger table in a wider circle that is blossoming all around us like Spring?

We are living what we proclaim: "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey you are welcome here." *And* we keep asking the questions. Celebrate what is happening and stretching and opening to even more – as the Spirit leads.

My sister wants everyone to bring gluten free and low sodium stuff to our family gatherings – stuff cooked according to HER guidelines and with utensils that haven't even touched other foods. She expects this of her church at potlucks too and criticizes those who "don't get" the intricacies of it all. It makes people afraid to come! I had to gently remind her that Rocky's graduation party was going to be a potluck for *all* from all sides of the family and they might need to bring dishes that were different than what she'd bring! Thank goodness for a thing called a "Burrito Bar!"

This is true of our church table, too, and I'm *not* just talking about casseroles! It's a metaphor. What dishes, life experience, faith journeys and spiritual food do we need to open ourselves up to at our Table, so that "no matter who you are or where you are on the Journey" can be lived out in authentic ways? So that every person who pokes their head in will find a

place set for them and they can bring their authentic selves – their branch – to the Table?

Recently, I heard Richard Rohr paint a picture of how people are “driven-to” OR “Drawn - in” in the Christian life. Driven-to has to do with being ego-driven: Having strong and final opinions about everything, every event, or most people.” As opposed to “soul drawn” -where we allow things and people to delight us, sadden us, and truly influence us.

This reminded me of how people come into our circles. Are we “driven-to” or “drawn in?” Is your participation in the life of the community a “have-to” or a “get to?” A hafta or a getta? Are you here, participating in ministry and life together because you feel you *should*, or you’d “*better get there*” or because you *can’t wait to get there*?!

<sup>11-15</sup>“I’ve told you these things for a purpose, says Jesus: that my joy might be your joy, and your joy may be complete. This is my command: Love one another the way I loved you.

The Table is set! Jesus bids us come. It is set for *all*. No matter where you’ve come from. No matter where you are on your faith journey. There are no auditions for *this* cast; *this* choir; *this* Divine Dance. We *get to gather*! Right here and now! Let us come.