

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

May 2, 2021 – FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, YR. B.

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*The Lone Ranger and Tonto*”*

Acts 8:26-40 (Philip explains the Scriptures to a Gentile whom he baptizes)
Psalm 22:24-30 (Praise to the Lord for His saving deeds)
1 John 4:7-21 (We are to love one another, for love is of God)
St. John 15:1-8 (Jesus compares Himself to a vine, and His followers as its branches)

How many of you remember the Lone Ranger? For those who don't know the story, he started out as a Texas Ranger who was wounded and left for dead. A Native American found him, and like the Good Samaritan in Christ's parable, nursed the ranger back to health. During this time, the two men bonded, and Tonto became the ranger's devoted helper and companion. Not wanting his enemies to know he had survived, the now Lone Ranger donned a mask and then went about righting wrongs and doing justice anonymously, all with the help of his faithful partner, Tonto (and of course, his horse, “Silver”). We can never think of the Lone Ranger without Tonto, and because the two were always together, the hero wasn't truly a lone ranger.

Likewise, as Christians, we are not, and cannot be, lone rangers. Our “Tonto” is the Spirit of Christ, on whom we must depend for help, guidance, protection, and victory over the evil that the world throws at us. Jesus speaks of this interdependent, essential relationship in today's Gospel reading. Here, He uses an allegory that would have been familiar to the ancient Jews.

In the Old Testament books of Judges, Jeremiah, Isaiah, the Psalms, and others that were part of their heritage, Israel was portrayed as God's vine or vineyard, with God as the vinedresser or caretaker. So Jesus picks up this traditional imagery but makes it much more personal. He says I am the vine, and you are the branches. Those who abide in—*who dwell with, stay by, draw close to*—me, and I in them, bear much fruit because (here's the important part): “Apart from Me, you can do nothing.” Wow! NOTHING!

We live in such a self-sufficient society. Everything is do-it-yourself. Have your own way. If you want it done right, do it yourself. We think we can handle everything by ourselves.

We get nervous about depending on, or trusting in, anyone else—especially God. But Jesus says it doesn't work that way when you're a Christian. You can't be a lone ranger. You need help, says Christ, My help. You need Me by your side.

The branch can't even survive, let alone grow and be fruitful, without the vine. The vine does and must do everything for the branches. It draws nutrients and water from the fertile ground and passes these on to the limbs and leaves as sap. The vine enables the branches to hold on, even in the wind, rain, and storms. But when the branch is severed from the vine, it quickly withers and dies, and is only fit for being burned with the trash.

Don't you gardeners do that with the broken, dead, or dried up branches that come down in your yard or are still clinging to an otherwise viable tree? They're good for nothing, right? You break them up or take them down and throw them away.

I never particularly liked grapes, but Rick and I have developed a fondness for certain kinds of them we've only recently discovered. Since then, I've learned something interesting. The grapes in the box that become separated from the stem quickly spoil. But the ones that still cling to the branch remain edible for some time. As I observed this, I thought about Jesus' teaching in today's Gospel— and how true it is.

We, too, shrivel and go bad, if we separate ourselves from Christ, if we fail to cling to Him without letting go, if we are not dependent upon Him for our very lives. So, how do we stay connected? Saint Paul tells us in First Corinthians 2:12 and 16: “We have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God ... we have the mind of Christ.”

God’s Holy Spirit dwelling within us—as a result of our faith in Jesus Christ—is what provides for us the companionship, help, guidance, direction, and correction we need. Listen to how First John 4:13 confirms this truth: “By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit.” Further, says St. John: “God abides in those who confess Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God.”

In First Corinthians 2 (1-5, 7-16), St. Paul says the world doesn’t understand this kind of talk. To unbelievers, it’s craziness, this notion of God’s Spirit living within us. But even in the Old Testament, in Ezekiel 36:26-27, God says to His people: “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you ... I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.”

Without having and depending upon God’s spirit within us, we cannot do His will, we cannot be fruitful or productive for Him. And Philippians 4:13 reminds us: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” Not “I can do *some* things, but I really can’t handle others.” But, I can do ALL things. Through my own flawed skills? Drawing upon my own limited resources? No. I can do all things through CHRIST who strengthens me—and through Christ alone.

In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus confirms this, saying: “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” Hear that? Help is available. Your prayers can get answered. God wants to meet your needs.

Tonto was the Lone Ranger’s faithful guide. As Christians, God is ours. Psalm 48:14 proclaims, “This is our God, our God forever and ever. He will be our guide forever.” Tonto scouted out dangerous situations for the Lone Ranger. Deuteronomy 31:8 says: “It is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.”

I don’t know what difficult unknowns or nasty surprises you may be facing this coming week with your job, your retirement, your finances, your health—or that of a loved one. But God knows. And that’s why He has given you His Holy Spirit, and provided you with the mind of Christ—the ability to see, understand, and act upon situations as Jesus would.

God knows we can’t go it alone. Do we? It’s OK to depend on God, to ask for His help, to borrow His ideas, use His words, follow His directions. The ancient Roman statesman and author, Seneca confessed [Epistles LXI.1]: “All my life, I have been trying to climb out of the pit of my besetting sins—in vain. And I never can, and never will, unless a hand is let down to me to draw me up.”

We need the hand of Christ to draw us up, and to hold on to. Do some of you know the old hymn that Patsy Cline once recorded: “Just a Closer Walk with Thee”?

I am weak but Thou art strong,
 Jesus keep me from all wrong,
 I’ll be satisfied as long
 As I walk, let me walk close to Thee.
 Just a closer walk with Thee,
 Grant it, Jesus, is my plea,
 Daily walking close to Thee,
 Let it be, dear Lord, let it be.

Walk closer to Christ, the vine. And you, the branch, will begin to show new growth and bear sweeter fruit for the Lord. If you've already borne fruit for God, don't disconnect that fruit from the stem on which it's growing!

Ah, but, Jesus says: You're also going to get pruned. *Ouch!* The more fruitful our lives are, we're going to get cut back? Pinched and nipped? Yes, the more we grow in our relationship with, and dependence upon, Christ, the more God will give us challenges, and even trials. Now, you gardeners and landscapers know that a regularly pruned bush grows much better than one that rarely goes under the clipper's blade. Pains and troubles that come our way are permitted by God in order to teach us courage, faith, discipline, and humility.

One Bible commentator has written: "If rightly met and used, these sorrows and trials through which we have to pass do open up new ministries of helpfulness, and do endow us with the sympathy, the understanding, the fellow feeling, the knowledge of what will help, which those who have not been so exercised are unlikely to possess." It's like the saying, "Religion is for people who go to church. Spirituality is for those who've been to hell and back—and survived." Even if you have to go to hell and back, never forget that God is with you there too.

Our natural human tendency is to be in charge, take control, do it ourselves, lean on no one. But all of that is an illusion. Without Christ WE CAN DO NOTHING!

The 16th-century English poet and clergyman John Donne once preached on the text of Hebrews 10:31, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."⁺ Yes, depending totally on God, trusting solely on Christ, leaning heavily on the Lord can be scary.

But consider the alternative. Could the Lone Ranger have been who he was without Tonto? Let yourself fall into the hands of the Living God. Let go of your self-sufficient pride and grab onto Jesus for dear life. He's far more necessary than American Express: Don't leave home without Him! Let Jesus be your friend and guide, your helper and companion, your protector and healer. Only good can come of it, and you will be pleasantly surprised at what a relief it is not to be in charge.

As one of my favorite church signboards reads: *If God is your co-pilot, switch seats.*

Amen? Amen!

* Adapt. N. George Hacker, 24 August 2003, Wesley Grove United Methodist Church, Gaithersburg MD. Used with permission.

⁺ Interpreter's Bible: Smith, *Donne's Sermons*, p. 26