

Rooted in relationship

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Where once we lived in a vital relationship with the earth, now we obtain our daily bread by filling shopping carts and running a plastic card through a scanner. This lack of connection hurts us—and the same is true in our spiritual lives. Jesus taught, "I am the vine, and you are the branches...apart from me you can do nothing." Of course there can be no growth apart from the vine. How can we continue to enjoy the fruits if we're no longer rooted in life-giving relationship with Jesus?

North Americans are efficient, rational, problem-solving people. We get things done—but our vital connection is at times tenuous. We might get wrapped up in doing good things, being in the right places, observing and analyzing others, selecting "the right church." What about living in relationship with Jesus?

Gerald Kennedy, a Methodist bishop of the last century, once remarked that the Methodist church was so well organized that it would flourish in America long after Christianity had ceased to exist. And so we sometimes wonder: Where is the connection with Christ? Where are we in the spiritual life? Anglican mystic Evelyn Underhill [posed](#) (pdf) the matter this way: "God is the interesting thing about religion."

"Apart from me you can do nothing." At the core of Christianity is the assumption that we can only be completed through the presence of Christ. To be a Christian is to trust that God overcomes our weaknesses, forgives our failures, heals our brokenness. At one level it is very simple.

I am aware that many people have had bad experiences with this idea, have had faith presented in terms of a simplicity that did not square with the world they actually lived in. Some were pressured toward an oppressive fundamentalism. "Jesus is the answer," they were told, when no one was very clear about what the question was in the first place. I've found this quote helpful (I'm unclear about its origin): "I would give nothing for a simplicity on this side of complexity. I would give

everything for a simplicity on the other side of complexity."

Some people have spent their lives running away from a stereotype of Jesus—whether the Jesus of fundamentalism or the Jesus of the secular scholars the media find so fascinating—and in the process have cut themselves off from the one who is the source of life and healing, of strength and mercy.

Later in the story, in [next week's reading](#), we find something equally astonishing. "I no longer call you servants," says Jesus, "but I have called you friends." To be a Christian is to be Jesus' friend—to be at home with him, to live in him and to know that he is alive. (Here *The Message's* [paraphrase](#) is helpful.)

How do friends stay connected? They stay in touch. Friends talk, listen, ask questions and are genuinely interested in each other. I recently traveled with a couple of friends to an out-of-town concert. Since we had time in the car together, we were able to learn about each other—our hobbies, our children, our work. We laughed; we talked about serious issues. There were also moments of silence. A friendship requires this kind of time spent together. A friendship with Jesus is all about prayer—time to talk and listen.

Our lives are filled with questions, crises, wounds and disappointments. We need the companionship of Jesus, whose promise, "I am with you always," is real. We need a friend who gently reminds us of a simple truth, even on the other side of complexity: "Apart from me you can do nothing."