

Part I: Connected in Creation

Scriptural basis: John 15:1-17

Introduction

The Bible teaches that God is the Creator. This fact is plainly stated in the *First Article of the Apostles' Creed*, which identifies God the Father as *Maker of heaven and earth*. God's work in creation was both intentional and purposeful. It was not an accident; it was not brought about by chance through a chain of events. Everything that exists is the result of God's loving, creative power, not only the things pronounced "very good" on the sixth day (Genesis 1:31), but everything that exists, including each person on earth. This study will focus on God's continuing creative actions and our connection to Him through His Son Jesus and the Holy Spirit, by the means of grace: the Word (Bible) and Sacrament.

Jesus Christ as Creator

Although the Father is identified as the *Maker* in the Apostles' Creed, this is not His only work, nor was creation accomplished without all persons of the Trinity.

Read John 1:1-3 and Colossians 1:13-16.

- Paying attention to the context of these passages, who is identified in these verses?
- What action is attributed to this person?

Now read Psalm 102:25-27 and compare these verses to Hebrews 1:10-12.

- Which of God's works are identified in these passages?
- Again, looking at the context, who does the writer of Hebrews identify as participating in creation?

It can be said that the Father created heaven and earth *through* His Son Jesus and the Holy Spirit (for Scripture on the Holy Spirit, see Genesis 1:2, and Psalm 33:6). There was no strict division of labor; rather, it was a collaborative effort of the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Jesus Christ, The Vine

Read our theme passage, John 15:1-6.

- How does this passage compare to the creation story? Do you see any correlation between the two?

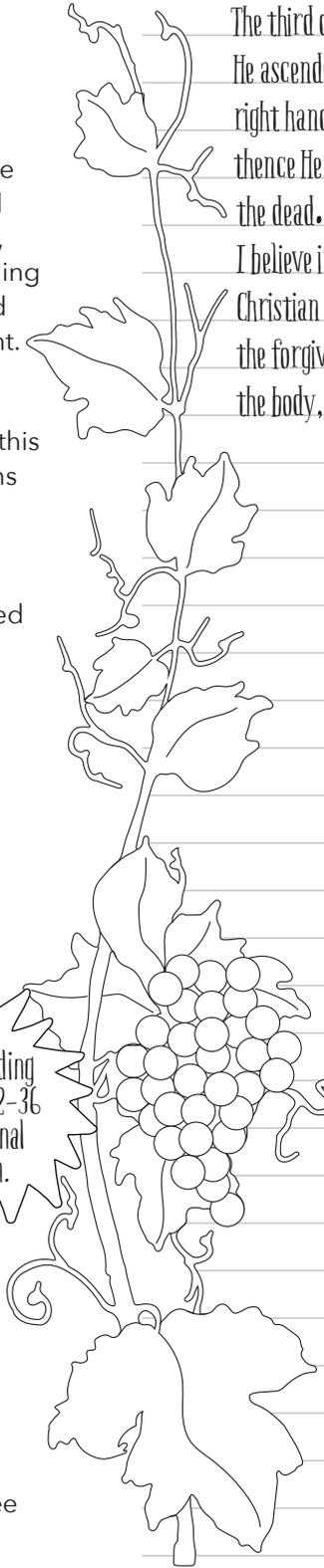
Confessional basis: The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, the Maker of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord.

Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and buried. He descended into hell.

The third day He rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From thence He will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.



Consider reading Proverbs 8:22-36 for additional discussion.

Because we are creatures, created by God, we are completely dependent on our Creator. This means we are *contingent beings*.

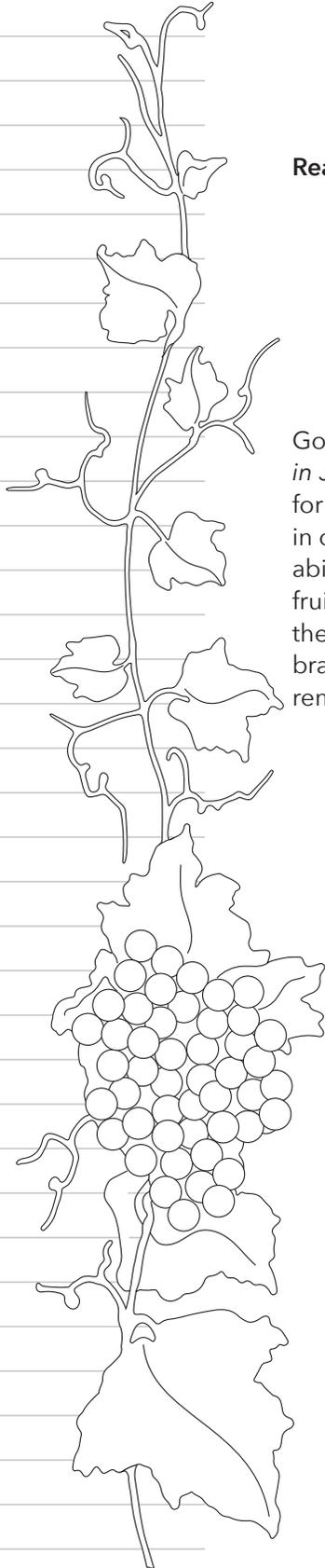
- How is God the Father, our Creator, pictured in this passage?
- How is God the Son, our Creator, pictured in this passage?
- How does this passage confirm our dependence on God?

Read Ephesians 2:8-10.

- Why does Paul use the word created?
- Compare the John 15 passage with this passage; how are they connected? (Pay particular attention to verses 4-5.)

God created all things *through* Jesus Christ, but each believer is created *in* Jesus Christ and must remain in Him in order to fulfill God's purpose for us. This is true for people of all abilities. Paul tells us we should *walk* in our good works, and Jesus calls our works *fruit*. All believers of all abilities produce fruit as a result of this *Christ Connection*. The works and fruit we produce is not our own; God prepares them for us. Jesus calls the Father *the vinedresser*, who tends and prunes the vine, enabling each branch to bear *much fruit* to His glory. Yet in order to produce we must remain on the vine, Jesus Christ.

- The *Christ Connection*, Jesus as the Vine and we as the branches, are seen in creation. Does this change your view of who you are?
- How does knowing creation is a gift from Jesus make you feel about your abilities or disabilities?
- How does knowing creation is a gift from Jesus make you feel about people with disabilities?
- How should knowing creation is a gift from Jesus influence our relationships in the parish or congregation?



Part 2: Connected in Christmas

Who is Jesus?

This question has been asked and answered in a variety of ways for over 2000 years. No other question so readily defines a person's core beliefs. The Christian faith is the only one that stands with the apostle Peter in saying ...*the Christ, the Son of the living God* (Matthew 16:16 ESV). That Jesus Christ is at the same time both fully divine and fully human is too difficult for any of us to completely understand. Even His conception is a miracle! God has left the details of Jesus' birth as a human (the Incarnation) shrouded in mystery; we can only receive this revelation through the gift of faith.

This world-changing event is not necessarily obvious to everyone. We believe, teach and confess that God our Creator loved us enough to become human. He loved us enough to live the life of a servant. He willingly suffered the shame and humiliation of a criminal's death, and defeated it.

- Do you believe this is the most important, world-changing event in human history?
- Why or why not?

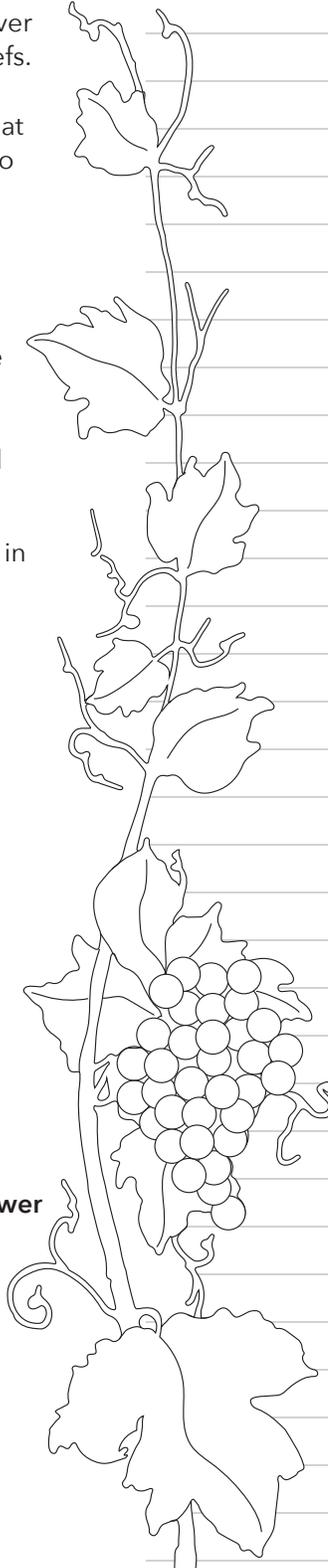
The Humanity of Jesus

In our last session we looked at a passage in the first chapter of Colossians. Let's continue by reading Colossians 1:17-22.

- What does this passage say about Christ being fully human and fully God?
- According to verses 21 and 22, what is the purpose of Jesus becoming human?

Read Hebrews 2:8-15. In the passage, "them" [humans] are made lower than angels.

- What does it mean to be *made lower than the angels*? (v. 9)
- Why is it necessary that Jesus is human? (v. 9, 14 and 15)
- How was this accomplished?



Read Hebrews 4:14-16.

- In what additional way are we connected to Jesus?
- In what way is Jesus' humanity different from ours?
- What does this add to the accounts of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness? (Matthew 4, Mark 1, and Luke 4)

The theme verse for our study is John 15:5. Read John 15:1-6.

- How does the illustration of the Vine and the branch help us better understand our connection to Christ?
- How does Christ's birth support this physical connection?
- What is the result of this *Christ Connection*?

We often limit our discussion of faith and Jesus Christ to our spirituality.

- Many of us have sung, "We are one in the Spirit..." Being one in the Spirit includes people of all abilities. We are all sinners; we all need Christ. Think about people you know who have disabilities. Are they all included at your place of worship? Why or why not?
- Do people with disabilities have the chance to serve in your congregation? Why or why not?

It is important to remember that our physicality is essential to our Christian walk, and central to the promises God has given us as well as our spirituality.

- **Read Matthew 25:34-40.** As human, Christ understood the importance of service. How should our physical connection to Christ respond to this passage?

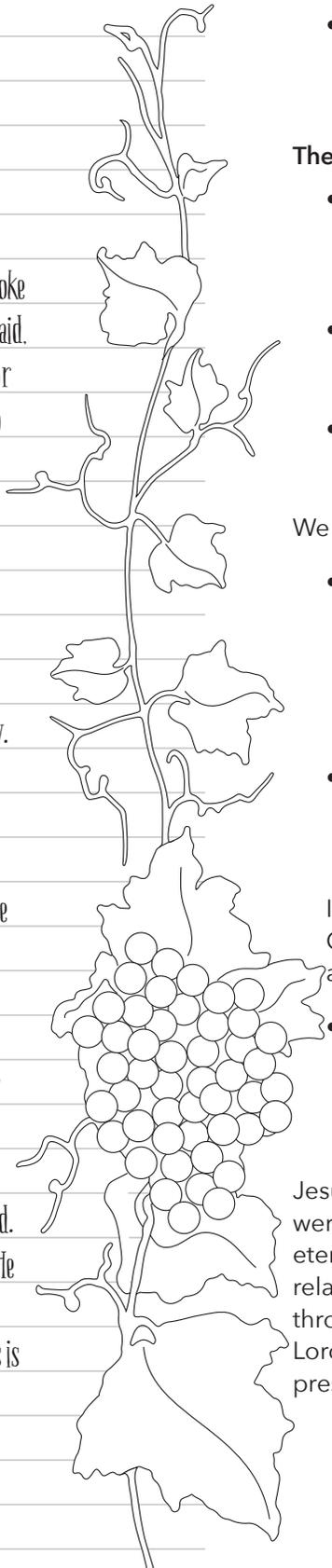
Jesus became human and lived perfectly, keeping the law we cannot. We were redeemed by His *physical* death, and will be united with God for eternity in our *physically* resurrected bodies. Jesus Christ maintains this relationship with all of us by making us a part of His body, the Church, through baptism. He strengthens this connection in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper; here we are reminded our Lord and Savior is *physically* present among us until His return.

Luke 22:19 - Then Jesus took bread. He gave thanks and broke it. He handed it to them and said, "This is my body. It is given for you. Every time you eat it, do this in memory of me."

John 6:51 - I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Everyone who eats some of this bread will live forever. This bread is my body. I will give it for the life of the world."

Mark 14:22 - While they were eating, Jesus took bread. He gave thanks and broke it. He handed it to his disciples and said, "Take it. This is my body."

Matthew 26:26 - While they were eating, Jesus took bread. He gave thanks and broke it. He handed it to his disciples and said, "Take this and eat it. This is my body."



Part 3: Connected Through the Church

In the past two studies we have explored the *Christ Connection* in our creation and in the Incarnation. We have learned all things are created through Jesus Christ, and all believers are created in Christ, regardless of their abilities. We have also discovered that because Jesus, the only Son of God, came to earth in human form, He was able to fulfill God's law and offer Himself as a physical sacrifice for our sins. Additionally, we will one day participate in a bodily resurrection just like His.

However, our *Christ Connection* does not belong to the past only! Jesus remains active today in His church, through the Word (Bible) and Sacraments. This study will explore how Jesus maintains His connection to us, and how He enables us to connect to others.

The Body of Christ

Read Colossians 1:15-19.

- What does this passage say about Christ and the Church? (notice v.18)
- Why is Christ supreme?

The apostle Paul begins by establishing Jesus Christ as, *the first born of all creation*. This affirms Jesus' dominion over the physical realm. Paul concludes this portion of Scripture by declaring Jesus Christ *head* of the Church. In so doing, Paul moves from the physical to the spiritual.

Read Romans 12:3-5 and 1 Corinthians 12:12-20.

- What common Church difficulty is Paul addressing in these passages?
- These passages use the body to show how the Church should function. How is that supposed to be?
- Does your place of worship function as the *Body of Christ*?
- Why or why not?

Gifts of the Body

Each of us becomes a part of the *Body of Christ* in our baptism. At the same time, each receives spiritual gifts intended to strengthen this body, the Church.



Read 1 Corinthians 12:4-11.

- Which spiritual gifts are represented in your group?
- Do you see gifts in others in this group they may not recognize in themselves?
- Have any of these gifts been utilized in your congregation?

Read John 15:1-6.

- How does Jesus' description of the vine compare with Paul's analogy of the human body?
- What is God's role in each of these examples?
- Discuss Jesus' use of *fruit* with Paul's use of *gifts*. What similarities or differences do you notice with these descriptions?

You may want to refer to Galatians 5:22-23 in your comparison.

Both Jesus and Paul emphasize the equality of believers. Each branch of the Vine is important as long as it remains connected to Christ; every body part's contribution is essential to the well-being of the whole. Paul calls us out for our tendency to attach more importance to certain gifts, while diminishing others. We should not judge other believers based on their contributions, gifts, talents or abilities.

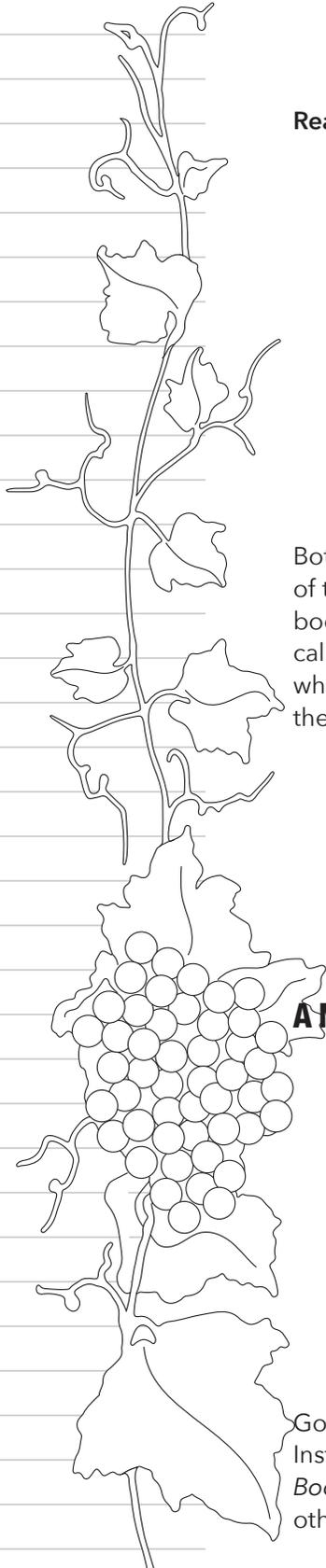
- What cautions against this type of behavior are found in the above passages?
- In what other ways are we tempted to judge others in the *Body of Christ*.

A New "Normal"

Read 1 Corinthians 1:26-29.

- Who does God include in His Church?
- Do you see evidence of this in your congregation? If so, how and where?
- How could you be more accommodating to those who are generally disregarded?

God does not choose, or gift, people based on their individual abilities. Instead, He uses each person He has called for the good of the entire *Body of Christ*. Despite our differences, we are to respect God's gifts to others, and encourage all to share and utilize their abilities.



Part 4: Connected to Serve

Introduction

In our last three sessions we have studied how Jesus Christ connects with us based on the three articles of the Apostles' Creed. We have discovered our *Christ Connection* is established by being created both *through* and *in* Jesus Christ. This bond is strengthened by the fact that Jesus became human in order to save us. This strengthened His connection to us. Finally, we have learned that Christ maintains and sustains this relationship through His body, the Church. The Church is where we hear God's Word and receive the Sacraments. Each of these actions is initiated and completed by God. God creates us, God sent His Son, who willingly became like us, and God gives and sustains our faith. We make no contribution in either establishing or building these connections. It is all a gift of grace.

In the World

Many of us have heard the phrase, "A Christian is to be in the world, but not of the world." It may surprise you this exact phrase is not found in the Bible. **Look at John 17:13-15 and 1 John 2:15-17.**

- How might we interpret these passages in light of being in, but not of, the world?
- In what ways are we to be *in the world*?
- In what ways are we to be *not of the world*?

Paul's definitions of *what was created* and the *Body of Christ* are the background for referring to the *Two Kingdoms*. The *kingdom of earth* is all things created. The *kingdom of God* is our relationship with God because of Jesus. The *kingdom of earth* is ruled by coercion and force, and *the kingdom of God* is ruled by the Gospel and grace.

Dual Citizenship

Christians are the only ones who move between the *Two Kingdoms*. Although we've been told to be a witness for Jesus Christ, it is not our only job on earth. We are also used by God in our every day walks. Our *vocation* is the principle way in which this is accomplished.

Vocation means different things to different people. Parenthood is a vocation, as is being a carpenter. Being the sponsor of a child in baptism is a vocation, and so is being an attorney. We are God's instruments in *the kingdom of earth*. God provides for the needs of others through us. He blesses us to be a blessing. Our vocation gives us the freedom to serve God as who we are and where we are; it is our calling. We have all been given the gift of vocation.



Read 1 Corinthians 7:17

- To what life have you been called?
- Which vocations are you fulfilling at this time?
- How have these changed over your lifetime?

Return to our theme passage, John 15:1-5.

- How might your interpretation of these verses change if you consider vocation?
- What fruit is the *Christ Connection* producing through you?

Connecting to Others

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:4-12

- What guidelines does Paul establish for the Christian life?
- How do these guidelines compare with the practices of Christianity in the modern world?

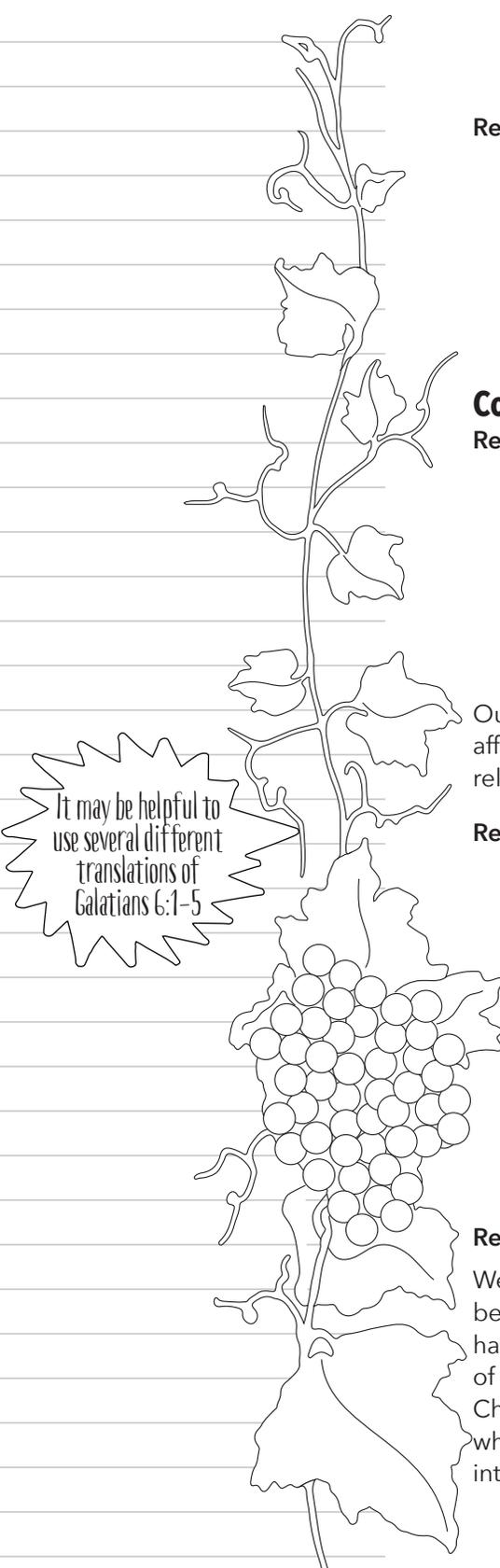
Our vocation determines many of our earthly interactions. It inevitably affects those He has placed around us. A Christian has no accidental relationships!

Read Galatians 6:1-5

- How can we justify the apparent contradiction between verses 2 and 5?
- How does bearing another's burden help us bear our own?
- How does bearing our own burden help us bear those of others? If you feel comfortable sharing specific examples, please do.

Reread John 15:5

We are created *in* and *through* Jesus Christ; and through our baptism we become members of His body, the Church. As His body-parts, each of us has specific purposes, both within the body and among those outside of the body. As branches we receive nourishment from the vine (Jesus Christ) which enables us to produce abundant fruit for the benefit of all who are placed around us. God uses us to extend the *Christ Connection* into our needy world.



It may be helpful to use several different translations of Galatians 6:1-5

