

*Shorelines of God* – based on John 15:1-8  
Aspen Community UMC  
May 10, 2009

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(Shorelines Title Slide)

The shorelines of God -

What could that possibly mean?

And what has it to do with the vines and the gardener?

“I am the vine and you are the branches. If you stay joined to me – I stay joined to you.

Stay joined to me and let my teachings become part of you.”

I'll attempt to answer using a metaphor from contemporary science -  
a metaphor from mathematics.

I bring it to you today – as we consider the words of Jesus -  
coming to us from the storyteller John.

Andrew and I have a friend – Douglas McKenna.

A few of you met Doug and Judith when they were in town during the winter to ski with us.

They came to one of our *Living the Questions* sessions several weeks back.

Doug is a mathematician and an artist – and a computer programmer and software developer.

Doug studied and worked at Yale with a teacher named Beniot Mandelbrot.

Mandelbrot is a mathematician who in the 1970's made an observation of nature.

His observation is that many things in nature follow a kind of self-repeating structure.

(fern slide)

For example – if you look at the leaf of a fern, the individual fronds of that leaf  
look like miniature ferns themselves -

and even the leaflets along the frond stems have the same fernlike pattern.

In a similar way, if you take a large tree limb – with its smaller branches and twigs -

(tree slide)

the limb looks like a miniature tree.

And so do the smaller branches and even the little clusters of twigs.

They all mirror the structure of the whole tree.

In a way – the whole is contained in each of the parts.<sup>1</sup>

These irregular shapes split into parts -

each of which is - at least approximately - a reduced-size of the whole.

Mandelbrot named them fractals.

(snowflake slide)

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Clouds, snowflakes, even (in a general sense) coastlines can all be understood as fractals.

The smaller the scale at which you study them -  
the more complex they become.

(icy coastline slide)

And too – with riverbeds and mountaintops – there are infinite patterns.



If Jesus were speaking today –

I wonder if he might suggest that we are God's fractals -  
God's coastline – God's shoreline – the edge of divine creativity.

(Mandelbrot slide)

Just as a branch – growing out of a grapevine –  
replicates the structure of the overall plan -  
and relies on the plant for life - we rely on the divine for our lives.

We too grow out of the nature of God.

We take on the shape of divine nature.

We submit to its pruning.



And - it extends beyond us.

In at least a general sense – our families – our community organizations -  
our workplace relationships – and so on – mirror this pattern.

Sometimes we call them echoing patterns.

Sometimes we say that a child is "a chip off the old block."

What would be another common phrase like this? Can anyone think of one?

"The apple.....doesn't fall far from the tree."

The way we are in the world –  
the way we mirror the beauty of the divine -  
we also mirror in our relationships.

We reflect the divine in our networks and the things we do.

And so – we must ask:

Does everything we do follow such a process?

Is it a divine process?



We must recognize that there is a brokenness in us -  
and our brokenness also tends to self-replicate.

We know unfortunately in families how people who were abused as children  
tend to become abusers themselves.

If they were devalued as children -  
that devaluing from the formative hands of their abusers  
can become a repeating pattern in their lives.

There is the workplace.

Even a workplace can be a life-giving or life-stunting vine.

One bitter person can progressively undermine  
a series of relationships and networks – even those that are distant.

It may be an inner wound – that causes a person to be bitter -  
and they go about infecting the patterns of relationships of many other people.

We tend to mirror in our own lives those people and places  
where we spend our time and give our attention.

And those patterns will be mirrored in other places.

The pattern may repeat itself endlessly.



The exciting thing is that in families and in workplaces -  
people can choose a different vine – to return to the metaphor of Jesus.

There is the vine – and there is the gardener –

and we have the power to choose amongst the vines.

Surely that's part of what we might call a divine process -  
another way to think about abiding on the vine.



(shorelines and island slide)

John Donne wrote a long time ago that “No man is an island, entire of itself.

Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.<sup>2</sup>

We are a part of a larger whole and we do tend to match that  
to which we are connected.

But – we have choices – unlike the fern frond or the snowflake -  
we have a choice about what we are going to attach ourselves to.

We have consciousness and we are able to decide  
to what shorelines we might belong.

Another way we might say it is that -  
we choose many of the vines we will branch from.

The problem is - we are not always all that conscious.

Is it enough to know in my head that I am created in God's image?

Or - to use the words of Jesus in our reading today – does “to abide in the vine” -  
mean a greater consciousness about the process of living and the choices we make?

Abiding in the vine is a blessing and an opportunity -  
a blessing and opportunity that joins me (as if on a shoreline) to the rest of the world.

I want live my life in a way that will support it.

This is what Jesus is saying.

His language is of pruning – pruning away things that do not help us abide -  
is the same thing as doing the things we need to do to be  
on a creative life-giving divine shoreline.



My final thought is about how we do that.

How can our lives support our intention?

Living intentionally takes practice.

Few of us live in a perfectly nurturing holy enclave.

Nor did Jesus – so he did things that kept him firmly rooted in God:

He worshipped regularly.

He took frequent time apart for prayer.

He took time for reflection.

He gathered around him friends who shared his vision.

That is how he did it.



How can we stay engaged on healthy vines – creative shorelines?

We can do several things -  
most of which come down to learning and service -  
taking opportunities as they come to strengthen the vines –  
and stretching our understandings –  
becoming more aware - broadening our experiences of life.

Here at the Community Church  
we had a Lenten study group called *Living the Questions* -  
to try and learn more as progressive Christians.  
We encourage volunteering and service right here in this community.  
We have people volunteering at the Thrift Shop.  
We have opportunities to teach English as a second language.  
We have had tutoring after school this past winter.  
We are active with others in finding solutions for homelessness and poverty.  
We reach out to a community in Kenya – and sponsor a child and support schools and libraries.  
We participate in relief efforts and collectively as United Methodists  
are always at work in the world to help people escape social injustice and oppression.  
In these ways - we reach out.

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We also reach in.

We pray for one another – for health and healing – and for healthy relationships.

We try to stay engaged on those creative shorelines as a spiritual community.

And friends – soul friends – don't we want  
persons who will care about our journeys in life? Yes – we do.

That's a big part of a spiritual community.



Think of what you will do this week -  
and imagine those chores – those tasks – those rituals of living  
that make up your life - chores along the shorelines – you might say.

Maybe we can be a little more centered in  
the call of God – the call of beauty – the call of grace  
on and in the shorelines of our lives.

They are creative places for good things to happen.

Jesus talked about a vine and a gardener.

The scientist and mathematicians may see those vines  
in the replications of nature – be they mountains and rivers and shorelines -  
or mathematical equations like this piece created by our friend Doug.

He calls it *Hepdragon Fire* – and it hangs in our living room.

It is composed of an endless series of triangles -  
each reflecting at an ever decreasing size -  
the whole within which it exists.



Who knows? The divine may be the great math teacher of heaven.

And some of the mathematicians and scientists  
on earth on catching wind of it – like our friend Doug.

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Well – I cannot say.

I can say that the images Jesus gives us in his words  
sure seem to be strangely close -  
to express a principle -  
to reflect the nature of things we look at today -  
in the patterns of ourselves – our families – our workplaces -  
in our math and science – and in our art.

(baby aspen leaves slide)

Go out and find them in the vines and leaves of your lives -  
the people you meet and the people you love -  
and the wonders of nature that are opening before you this Spring.  
Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> This discussion is taken from Proclaim Preaching Resources citing B. B. Mandelbrot: *The Fractal Geometry of Nature* in Wikipedia

<sup>2</sup> John Donne, Meditation XVII in *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (1624).