

“The Vine and the Branches”

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John 15:1-5; 9-11

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Jesus chooses the image of the grapevine to talk about the nature of the Christian community. But the grapevine may be a long way from the modern day experience of most suburban Americans.

I can remember my own first encounter with real grape vines. I have a long-time friend in Switzerland named Gerard. Gerard’s family owns a home near Lake Geneva. It is a breathtakingly beautiful part of Switzerland with lush green mountainsides sloping down to the shore of a deep blue lake. And as far as the eye can see, the mountainsides are covered with grapevines. Scattered across the mountainsides are picturesque Swiss chalets. Gerard’s family has been raising grapes on this hillside for generations. When you visit, Gerard wants to take you out to see his grapevines because he is very proud of them. And, of course, you want to share his enthusiasm.

But when you get to the actual grape vines they themselves are not so beautiful. It is hard to say anything nice about these grapevines because they are basically ugly gnarly stumps. In and of themselves they are not very beautiful. And yet wonderful wine comes each year from these ugly gnarly stumps. And so Jesus chooses the unlikely image of the grapevine to talk about the nature of the Christian community. Jesus said “I am the vine and you are the branches.” We all know that branches don’t last long apart from the larger tree or vine to which they are attached. The image implies that we need to be connected to the source of nurture and power in order to be productive.

One commentator has suggested that one of the challenges of modern life is that we’re more connected than ever, yet also feel increasingly isolated. We have more and more friends on Facebook, but fewer friends that we actually see and talk with in person. We are “linked in” all over the place, yet rates of reported loneliness and depression are skyrocketing. We seem to be almost drowning in information while simultaneously starved for actual experience, particularly the experience of being in real relationships. What Jesus offers his disciples here is not simply connection – that’s not enough to nourish life – but relationship, community, life in its abundance. But the truth is that being in genuine relationship and real community isn’t always easy.

We tend to romanticize these things, especially when we’re feeling lonely. But relationships have ups and downs, give and take. We have to be vulnerable in relationship, which means that we can never completely protect ourselves from being hurt. It is the same with community. Communities are made up of real people, some nicer, some not. And being in community means dealing with that. Community and relationships are not easy but they are real. Maybe what Jesus is saying is that, being connected to him, we are also able – even free- to be connected with each other. In light of God’s acceptance of us, we can then turn and try to accept each other, living with the imperfections of even our best relationships and communities because we know ourselves to be imperfect and flawed and yet also loved.¹

¹ “Getting Real” by David Lose.

But another implication of the image of the vine and the branches is that we are not isolated rugged individualists. And certainly our American mindset idolizes the rugged individualist, the cowboy on the frontier, the self-sufficient hero. One minister said, in reflecting on this passage: vines and branches are all tangled and messy; it's just too hard to know what is what. If she were going to bear fruit she wanted it attributed to her and her branch. If she's too tangled up with other vines and branches she might not get credit.

So she felt like saying to Jesus . . . "can I be something a little more distinct? Perhaps you are the soil and I am . . . the sunflower - big, bright, audacious and distinctive." But no – vines and branches – that's what we get. So, not only are we dependent on Jesus, but our lives are uncomfortably tangled up together. The Christian life is a vine-y branch-y jumbled mess of us and Jesus and others.² Christianity is a lousy religion for the "do it yourself" crowd. And so Christianity runs against the grain of Western Individualism. Jesus reminds us that we are dependent on God and on one another. Christian life in community is a vine-y branch-y sort of thing.

Community/Church

So the image of the vine and the branches reminds us that we are part of a Christian community – this local church congregation. There are those who would say "I can be a good Christian all by myself without the church," but this passage reminds us that God calls us into community. We accomplish more together as a community than we do as isolated individuals. We are more than the sum of our parts.

Baptism also symbolizes the connection that binds us together. Just as generations before stood present and made promises at our baptism, so now we stand present and make promises for Sam's baptism, knowing that his generation will carry this on for generations yet unborn. This living community stretches down through the centuries. The vine that Jesus talks about in today's passage symbolically connects us with the faithful down through the ages and with the faithful all across the world. The community extends into the past. Many wonderful saints have worshipped here in this sanctuary with us in the past and, when the community gathers, that great cloud of witnesses is still present with us. We are surrounded by this cloud of faithful witnesses.

This community also extends all around the world. We are part of a worldwide community linked to faithful Christian communities in Kenya and El Salvador and Syria and many other places. And so this Christian community stretches us in time and space. It links us to the past and it stretches all around the world.

Love

Jesus also says: As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you, abide in my love. You get the impression that the word "love" in our popular culture is sort of overused and trivialized; misunderstood and worn out; misused and abused. But what we hear in the popular culture is not what Jesus was talking about. The love we read about in the Bible is qualitatively a different kind of love. To embrace Jesus's kind of love and to share it with the world is to be transformed forever.

Martin Luther King once wrote that he had "decided to love." Christian love is not so much a matter of emotion and feeling as it is an intentional decision to live in such a way that we embrace the world that God loves. And so we need to hold on to each other. This is a time when so many other things seem to be spinning apart. This is an age of detachment and

² "I Want to be a Sunflower for Jesus" by Nadia Bolz-Weber.

disconnectedness. Competitiveness, a mobile society, and the fragmentation of life tend to isolate people. And we need love to reach out and bring people back together in the midst of it.

The text is reminding us that we are a community. And that we find our fulfillment in being part of that community. To abide in the vine is to be connected to that community. And the way in which we reach out and embrace that community is through love. There is no place so small that love can't make a difference. There is no place so huge that love can't make a dent - a family - a neighborhood - a city - a congregation - a denomination.

Abide - An Old-fashioned Word.

Jesus says here: "Abide with me as I abide with you." Rev. Dean Lueking, a Lutheran pastor and former colleague of mine in Oak Park, once wrote a reflection on the word "abide". Of the 17 uses of abide listed in the Oxford dictionary, eight are obsolete. The word seems to belong to another time. "To abide" has to do with persevering, continuing, lasting, staying with it. No wonder that term is rare. What it means is rare, in this or any time. Lueking goes on to say that the absence of abiding diminishes us. Friendships break off. So do treaties between nations. Business contracts become tissue thin. God alone knows the river of tears set in motion by the absence of abiding - the foundation of Christian community.³

The story is told by a Presbyterian pastor about a woman in his congregation who had given up a promising career as a lawyer in order to raise her four children. That week she had received a letter from her college roommate who had just become a partner in a prestigious New York law firm. And she couldn't help but think that is where she could have been if she had not postponed her career in order to raise her family. On that particular day, two of her children had fought all day long. The third was sick with chicken-pox. And the fourth woke up with an attitude that got worse as the day went on. She had the feeling that she had given up her own career in order to chaperone four ungrateful urchins.

At the end of the day she finally got all the children to bed. Then she went to clean up the living room which was strewn with toys. There was an open book with a page torn out. She realized it was an encyclopedia. As she got the scotch tape and began to tape the shredded page back together again, she realized that the picture was the face of a child. Once she had reassembled the pieces of the puzzle, she turned it over and discovered that the back side of the page was a map of the world. And she realized that symbolically, by putting together the face of a child, she was also putting back together the face of the world.⁴ The business of abiding in love has the possibility of transforming the world in small and imperceptible ways.

Easter Season

The Sundays that follow Easter in the church year are called the "Easter Season." In this post-Easter season we think about what Easter means for the life of the church and for our own lives. Several weeks ago I was visiting the town of Woodbury, New Jersey, just south of Philadelphia. It was the week after Easter and, as I was walking down the main street, I walked past the First Presbyterian Church of Woodbury. I noticed that one of the members was hauling the church's Easter lilies out of the sanctuary and planting them outside around the perimeter of the church building. This is a downtown church with about three feet between the sidewalk and the wall of the church and so it was hard to miss those Easter lilies. But it seemed to me that the symbolism

³ F. Dean Lueking, "Abide in Me," Christian Century, 1998.

⁴ Rev. Terry Swicegood, retired Presbyterian pastor.

was right --- that in this Easter season we take the message of Easter out of the sanctuary and into the world. It is not sufficient to keep this good news cooped up inside the church. As you walked down that street you couldn't help but think about Easter with those lilies grabbing your attention. It is a message worth sharing. And so we take Easter out into the world – the message of hope and new life. In the events of Easter we celebrate that a new order has conquered the old order.

When we hear about “eternal life” we tend to think of that as life after death. But the truth is that much of what the Bible has to say about “eternal life” assumes that eternal life is life transformed by Christ and that it can begin in the here and now. And so, what we celebrate in Easter is not just “pie in the sky by and by” but a new order dawning in our midst right now. And living in community is part of that transformed new life. And so in all these ways we need a little more “abiding” in our time. These are difficult times - when lots is changing all around us. And so even when our world trembles and shakes a little, we continue to abide.

These are times when constancy is not a priority for many people. People ride the waves of the times, the fads of the moment. There is so much that is superficial about modern life. People long for that which has depth and can last. We need a little more abiding in our time.

Nature of Abiding

So maybe the idea of “abiding” is not so old-fashioned after all. We sing “Abide with Me” knowing that, even when our “abiding” is erratic, that won't stop Jesus from abiding in us. Jesus abides, lasts, endures, continues, hangs in, and holds on to us. The words: “Abide in me as I abide in you” remind us that first we experience God's grace and then follows our own commitment. The message of new life and new beginnings which we celebrate on Easter has on-going significance throughout the year.

It is an ongoing Easter miracle that Jesus works us into his astonishing new creation. We are sort of grafted onto the vine and made part of that new life. The metaphor of the vine and the branches is a powerful reminder that we need to be connected to the source of our nurture and power. This contradicts any notion of God's power as removed, uncaring and uninvolved.

The productive life of faith is possible only when believers remain connected to the vine and to each other. And so the image of the vine captures the way in which we remain connected to Jesus; growing in faith, rooted in love. To be human is to be part of a community. The vine becomes a symbol for life in community - the way we are related to Christ and to one another. “I am the vine and you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit because apart from me you can do nothing.”⁵

And so we say “May God be praised.”

AMEN

⁵ John 15:5