

## "Serving as Branches" - May 3, 2015

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Isaiah 5: 1-7; John 15:1-8

Just before Jesus' words in our gospel reading this morning, he says: "Rise and let us get on our way." But he doesn't get up right away, but stays, abides with his disciples a little longer, continuing with final teachings and instructions, before his arrest.

Last week, we heard Jesus say: I am the good Shepherd who cares for my sheep. And this morning, I am the true Vine and you are the branches. The metaphors for God and Jesus in the Bible always point to relationships—with God, with Jesus, and with one other; they all point to the communal and relational nature of our Christian faith, within and beyond our faith community.

In many ways, this is countercultural for us; in our society, individual success and gratification, individual goals tend to be lifted up as the #1 priority. Not to mention the phenomenon of the "selfie"—Me, me, me! In contrast, Jesus portrays a living, growing community of faith in which every branch recognizes its vital role and produces "much fruit" for the good of the whole. In this small part of God's vineyard, we practice together through ministries that we take out into our everyday lives, ministering to others each day and producing fruit for all to share.

The imagery of God's vineyard is beautiful and inspiring, with God as the vinegrower, Jesus as the Vine and his disciples as the branches. But when I first read Jesus' words from the gospel of John, they just seemed to be words on the page.

You see, like many if not all of you, I have been very troubled by all the events of this past week: thousands of deaths in Nepal, rioting in Baltimore and continuing racial tensions there & elsewhere, trials of 2 young men who caused deaths, injuries and great suffering at the Boston Marathon and in a theater in Colorado. God's vineyard seemed light years away.

I have often found that when we cannot hear the Spirit speaking to us through a certain biblical passage, it is good to read other verses with the same or a similar theme. So I decided to explore the Old Testament prophets who often used the metaphor of the vineyard.

The very first verses that I came to were from Isaiah 5—and I was stunned and deeply moved. It is a love song for God who carefully planted a vineyard.

*My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside.*

*He dug it, cleared away its stones, planted it with excellent vines,*

*He expected it to grow good grapes—but it grew wild grapes---rotten, bitter, sour grapes*

Then the voice of God speaks—in anguish and in anger.  
*What more was there to do for my vineyard that I haven't done for it?  
When I expected it to grow good grapes, why did it grow wild grapes?*

God proclaims that the vineyard of Jerusalem and Judah, will therefore be destroyed. will no longer be protected from predators; the walls will be broken down and the vineyard trampled. God will no longer tend the vineyard; instead, it will become a ruin.

These were the plantings in which God had delighted. And the last two verses say it all: *God expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!* Those words really hit me.

Now, I don't believe that God causes earthquakes. And I don't believe that God destroys people or places as a punishment for human sin. The terrible things that humans do and say, the lack of compassion and respect for human life---all have their own terrible consequences and cause great suffering in our world and our lives. And that includes the destructive actions that threaten the well-being of our earth.

We grieve over human suffering, and God weeps with us. We also feel anger at human injustice and cruelty but we don't use that anger to destroy. No, our anger stirs us to work together and make changes that benefit the whole.

The good news was staring me in the face. The destruction of the vineyard is not God's last word---nor is it ours. And Jesus' words in the gospel of John proclaim this truth in a powerful way. **Jesus invites us to enter into a deeper relationship with him, with God and with one another, a relationship that is one of mutual abiding in love.**

Jesus takes the common everyday image of the vine and transforms it into a symbol of radical community, mission and love. Jesus is the authentic Vine, we are the branches, and God is the vinegrower, the tender of the vineyard, the gardener.

As you will read in our newsletter, something else disturbed me this past week, the words that a UCC pastor wrote about the response of clergy working for peace in Baltimore. He said: *What is the credible message of the church in this context? 'Love everybody' does not work in this context. In reality, there is no easy answer.*

Is this pastor really “dissing” Jesus' commandment? Jesus didn't say: *Love your neighbor only in the contexts where it will work.* And who says that loving your neighbor as yourself is an easy answer?

Jesus never gives his disciples easy answers; listen again to his first words in this morning's gospel reading *“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower*

*who removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit the vinegrower prunes to make it bear more fruit.* It becomes clear in this chapter that Jesus is talking about love and the relationship that lies at the heart of life and its flourishing: the relationship between God, Jesus Christ, you and me!

Is that a credible message of the church in this context? More like incredible, right? More like, let's get down to working on what the Christian life and church is all about--- love and resurrection, mending broken relationships, starting again from the beginning, persevering in the attempt to understand the other, tirelessly striving for self-control, examining our hearts honestly and pruning what needs to be pruned.

In the tending of a vineyard, the best grapes are produced closest to the central vine, where the nutrients are concentrated. Gardeners must prune the branches so that they don't ramble all over the place, becoming weak and unproductive, or even dying. We all know that pruning results in healthier plants later. And healthier people too, for example, when we prune away old grievances.

The hard work is ongoing, recognizing, healing, releasing what is separating us from God, Jesus and one another. In Jesus' imagery, the pruning of the branches is intimately connected with the bearing of good fruit.

Jesus also says: *You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you.* Cleansing clears away whatever spoils or ruins life. That is the power of Jesus' words, his teaching and commandments, when we truly make them a part of us, when we abide in Christ as he abides in us. Living, abiding, finding our home in Jesus the vine and God the grower sustains us and leads us to greater well-being and growth.

*Abiding--remaining, staying in place, persevering, enduring, holding out, being with and for each other,* as God and Christ are with and for us. Abiding in Christ means loving God and one another and bearing much good fruit.

An easy answer to human violence and conflict? NO.  
A good and holy answer? YES! If it isn't, what are we doing here?

So, what **fruit** are we to bear? The apostle Paul writes about nine attributes as fruit, such as kindness and goodness, generosity and self-control. That's a good start. Being fruitful has everything to do with tangible acts of compassion, the building of healthy community, and the work of justice. **The key is that the branches receive their nourishment from the central vine and then grow by reaching outward and producing much fruit to share with others.**

An abundant harvest is possible through this powerful triangular relationship between God, Jesus, and the community of faith.

As branches, we must not only stay connected to the true Vine. We must also recognize, receive and rejoice in the work of the gardener who tends the vineyard, who prunes and cleanses the branches. We respond to God's love and mercy through our own acts of love; these acts, this bearing of good fruit are the marks of Christ's disciples.

There is always the temptation to go it alone and trust in our own strength as individuals. Jesus warns us of the danger of becoming disconnected from God's love and Jesus' teachings. *Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers.* This is not a punishment from God, this is a consequence of not abiding in love as love abides in us.

You and I know from experience how the human spirit can wither---and we know what it feels like to produce wild, sour, bitter, or even rotten grapes. When we see the warning signs, it's time to reconnect to the Vine and the Vinegrower, going out into the thick of things, demonstrating in small and not so small ways the power of God's abiding love.

In the world of gyms and fitness centers, people talk about the importance of building up a strong core, physically. Equally essential, perhaps even more essential, is the building up of a strong spiritual core. Our challenge as a faith community is to ensure that we stay intimately connected to the Vine and the Vinegrower.

We are fallible people of faith, just like the people of Israel to whom the prophet Isaiah first spoke. But Jesus reminds us that he is the true vine who lies at the heart of the vineyard; he is the one who fulfills the expectations and the vision of the vinegrower. The kingdom of God is already here and not yet fulfilled. We can invite people of different faiths and no religious faith---to share the holy vision of justice – without bloodshed---and righteousness, with neither the cry of the oppressor or the oppressed.

The glory of God is revealed in mutuality of love, interdependence and abiding that bears much fruit, for the benefit of all. Isn't this a credible message of the church in every context?

Now is the time. As Jesus said to his disciples: "*Rise and let us get on our way.*"

#### Resources

[www.homileticonline.com](http://www.homileticonline.com). Commentaries and sermons on John 15: 1-8.

[www.ucc.org](http://www.ucc.org). Weekly Seeds by Rev. Kate Huey

Bartlett, David and Barbara Brown Taylor, Eds. *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 2. Westminster John Knox Press (Louisville, 2008) pp.472-477

