

Acts 8:26-40
Psalm 22:24-30
1 John 4:7-21
John 15:1-8

This is the time of year when many of us get interested...once again...in gardening. The weather is warmer, the plants are growing, there's plenty of rainfall, and the trees and shrubs are coming back to life after a long, cold winter season of hibernation. There's new life everywhere and we can look forward to seeing our plants and shrubs growing and flowering. It's the season of rebirth which often reminds us of resurrection. It's no wonder that people are drawn to nature at this time of year. Jesus uses our fascination with gardening to his advantage in teaching us about the nature of God and our relationships with the Trinity and with each other. It's all intertwined and these relationships function very much like the laws that govern vegetation.

We have come to the part of John's gospel that is known as the Farewell Discourse of Jesus to his disciples. It is after the resurrection and before the ascension and Jesus is preparing his disciples for his ultimate departure from this world. It wants them to know about what will happen to him and to them in the near future and he especially wants them to know how he expects them to live with one another and how to build the kingdom of God on this earth after he's gone. Last week we heard about the Good Shepherd who knows and cares for each of his sheep. The Good Shepherd is the great protector and provider for the sheep and the sheep know him by the sound of his voice and he knows each one of them and takes care of them. The passage we heard this morning is one more chapter in the book of expectations that Jesus has for his disciples' life together in his absence.

The ultimate meaning of the agrarian metaphor needs a little explanation for those of us who aren't familiar with an agrarian lifestyle. We may know a few things about ornamental shrubbery, but we don't necessarily know much about life in a vineyard. And we don't know very much about communal living. Our American lifestyle and folklore do not lend themselves to the kind of lifestyle that Jesus knew on earth or the kind of lifestyle that he recommends to his disciples. The American ethos of rugged individualism so prevalent in American folklore actually works against us when we are trying to establish a lifestyle that reflects our belief in Jesus and our aspirations to live out our Christian faith. Jesus is not promoting the idealization of the self-made man or woman. Jesus is promoting a lifestyle that is firmly rooted in community and concentration on the welfare of others and decisions that represent a concern

for the good of the whole, not self-promotion. That involves self-sacrifice. Our American lifestyle actually actively works against the lifestyle that Jesus has set forth for us. That makes it even harder to practice a Christian lifestyle. In Jesus' world, there are no self-made people as all are dependent upon God and intertwined with each other. It's very hard to hold those two diametrically opposed lifestyles together as they work against one another. We need to search a bit to understand the agrarian metaphors Jesus uses to teach us how he wants us to live in discipleship to him. It's not at all similar to what we learn about how to live in our culture.

The agrarian metaphor we heard this morning about the true vine is full of valuable information for us, but before we can get to that information we need to understand a little bit about the nature of vines and vineyards as well as something about the audience that is listening to John's gospel just as we did. That audience is grappling with the possibility of being ostracized from the religious group of their childhood and youth...the community that has raised them and cared for them all their lives...because of their new found faith in Jesus. Our human connections are priceless to us and our inclusion in a faith community or a neighborhood or a village may be what sustains us through good times and bad. The social groups we belong to now serve the same function. To risk losing that source of support and nurture is to put our very lives in danger not to mention the emotional pain of being cut off from others. The audience listening to John's gospel and hearing Jesus' teachings through that gospel are struggling with their newly-found faith in Jesus and a lifetime of nurture in the community of the synagogue that may very well turn them out because of their faith in Jesus. This ostracism has serious consequences for these disciples of Jesus. Their very lives are hanging in the balance. As Jesus speaks his truth to them, Jesus knows what lies ahead for them and what their very real fears are about their lives in a new faith community without the physical presence of Jesus. So Jesus teaches them using the agrarian metaphor of the vine and the vinedresser and the vineyard.

Jesus tells them that he is the true vine. The Old Testament metaphor using the vineyard has God as the vinedresser and Israel as the vine. That's why Jesus says, "I am the true vine." The vine is no longer Israel, but Jesus himself. His followers are the branches on the vine and the vinedresser is God. Any of you who have ever done any gardening know that vines are thick trailing plants with long roots that attach themselves to everything in their path and will grow uncontrollably and result in one big tangles mess if left on their own. A vinedresser, in this case God himself, has to keep the vines in order. The vinedresser must cut away lifeless, unproductive branches and prune those branches that *are* productive. This seems counterintuitive, but gardeners soon learn that certain plants and flowers benefit from having the first blooms pinched away so that the plant will become fuller and bloom even more as it matures. The idea of being 'pruned' by God or anyone else has never appealed to me, but apparently pruning has some unheralded benefits. Perhaps the 'pruning' that we undergo at

the hands of the God who loves us, simply clears the path for even more spectacular blooming later down the road. There's the element of trust here. Jesus tells us to abide in him and he will abide in us. He is the true vine and we know that the branches that are closest to the vine are the ones that get the most nutrients for growing and as such are the ones that produce the most fruit. The aim of the vinedresser is a fruitful yield. So we must stay as close to the true vine as we can get and we need to trust that the vinedresser who also loves us will prune us in a way that will promote health and new growth. Our branch may look dead, but its proximity to the true vine renders it alive and flourishing. The vinedresser, God, has tough work to do. The Greek word *kathairō* is translated as 'prune' and as 'cleansed' which may help us understand this metaphor a little more deeply. Being 'cleansed' doesn't have the same emotional meaning as being 'pruned.' We bear fruit not by squeezing it out of ourselves but because we are extensions of the vine, pruned by the gardener-God who wants us to be fruitful and to be drawn into the unity of the Father and Son. God's love, presence, and pruning are gifts. But we do choose the abiding place of our soul. If we want to bear Jesus' fruit, then we choose to abide in him. To abide in him is to make our home in him and to let him make his home in us. We need to want to be as close to him as possible.

But we don't do this alone. We do this in community. The vine does not have only a single branch, but multiple branches that are intertwined and interconnected just as we are in our church community. Only attachment to Jesus' words, his message, the gospel, as understood in community, will ensure that the church produces fruits. Apart from that there is nothing we can do. And whatever else we do we may be doing it for the wrong reasons. When the church forgets that its mission is to show its attachment to Jesus by uncompromisingly proclaiming the gospel in today's society, then it becomes a disposable part of God's vine. Yes, the words are hard but true. The church becomes an institution that tries to accommodate to the world rather than to transform it. It ceases to be attached to the source of life and becomes a mere institution seeking self-preservation. How many of us have wondered if this is our current situation. Have we forgotten the source of our nourishment? Have we abandoned our mission in an effort to save ourselves?

As Gale O'Day suggests, "In a vine, branches are almost completely indistinguishable from one another; it is impossible to determine where one branch stops and another branch starts. All run together as they grow out of the central vine."¹⁷ There is an absence of hierarchy in this vision of the church as branches of a vine because they all belong to the same vine and are tended by the same vinegrower. Therefore, there is no status, everyone is equal, everyone is responsible for bearing fruit. The only condition is to love each other as Jesus loved us. We have lost sight of this basic idea in our highly structured church. And we run the risk of losing touch with the one we value most...Jesus...the true vine.

As we struggle with the contradiction between our American societal ideals and the diametrically opposed mandate from Jesus about how we are to live our lives, may we never lose sight of what we need the most...not the rugged individualism of our culture, but the love and humility of our Savior, Jesus Christ. That's where abundant life and true success reside.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.

¹Gail R. O'Day, "The Gospel of John," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, 491-865.