

St Pius & St Anthony Homily 5th Sunday Easter Year B

Jesus tells us that He is the vine and we are the branches today. He gets me thinking about why a vine and branches. I love plants and love planting things, not that I know anything about what makes for good growth, other than attention and water (not too much) and can I admit in public, that I could believe that talking to plants helps them? But I wonder with Jesus why he says vine and branches? Certainly his illustration of how He relates to us and we are to relate to Him is an organic, natural image, much like a lot of the rest of His teaching. He has a whole series of parables such as the sower and the seed (Mark 4), the tiny little mustard seed, the lesson of the fig tree (Mark 13), 'By their fruits you know them' proverb (Matt 7), the secret growth of seed (Mark 4) and maybe my favorite of the Wheat and the Weeds (Matt 13) because of the crop mentioned that I am unfortunately good at growing, & not the wheat. So for Jesus to talk about 'vine and branches' should not surprise us. But it does me. Why? Because I wonder if Jesus is the vine, he could have used the stronger image of I am the tree (trunk) and you are the branches. But He didn't. The Old Testament had praised the mighty cedar trees of Lebanon (they are mentioned over 70 times in the bible by such prophets as Isaiah, Ezekiel, also Books of Samuel and Kings and the Psalms – which praises them for their 29 & 92). Cedars were used for supporting columns in the Great Temple, and for huge masts of sea worthy ships. I Am told that the Lebanon cedars are in the family with our land's great sequoias or CA redwoods. So for a strong image- Jesus could have said 'I am the trunk, you are the branches.' But he didn't. He said I am the vine and you are the branches. Let's explore together why he chose 'Vine'. Maybe he is saying human nature is more like a vine than a tree.

1) First, a vine needs more care, more attention..... for a tree, put a seed in ground, walk off and leave it.....let it be..... but with a vine such as fruit vines, are different, a vine needs a daily walk through by a vine dresser down the row, to examine its 'branching out', maybe 'train it' brace it up, lift it off the ground, keep it from growing into what will kill it or trample it, if the wind has twisted it, straighten it out, massage it and turn its leaves back over; all this daily care comes with the vine different from the solitary tree just growing straight up all alone

2) Secondly, I am always struck by the new possibilities introduced by pruning and grafting. And mostly by the work around growth that surfaces after a clipping. Often

I see where the new connector point swells strong, it thickens to make the bond more durable..... maybe not the extending stem but the joint thickens making the hinge the strongest part of the extension (is that like that what I heard in welding, that the bond becomes stronger than the material- any new break isn't going to be at the joint it will be the surrounding steel...?) so Jesus' vine image was emphasizing the strength of the bond between him as the vine and us as the extending shoot. He is the extra strength at the joint-bond on the vine the thickened node at the point of new branching growth.

3) Thirdly, maybe another uniqueness about a vine (compared to a tree) is its way of flexible growing, maybe up a little, over to the side a little, and it is always eager to jump out a new shoot for growing out that way to find another resource of light shining down or water moisture falling down - not stationary in the same spot to compete over same limited available resources. Or they grow flexibly, to grow out sideways for stabilizing, and grabbing ahold of something firm to hold onto.

4) fourthly, related to the flexible direction of growth, another uniqueness about a vine over a tree for Jesus and us as His church, is that the Vine is just more expansive, it stretches out and grows more horizontally than vertically. That demonstrates two qualities of church 1) its mission always having an outward, spreading direction and 2) its faithfulness despite opposition, to that mission. Vines take off, they go out, they send out shoots in every direction..... that sounds like Jesus' command in Matthew 28:19 "Go out to all the nations (every direction) making disciples-teaching and baptizing". A vine is just a better image than a tree of such sideways ever expanding growth that Jesus is after. And that growth is faithful despite obstacles, something in its way, it grows around it so I think Jesus is also saying 'never give up' in discipling like a vine, not a tree. He is telling us to be more supple and pliant like vines growing this kingdom of Jesus, not like a rigid sedentary tree (grand looking only when it grows upward all alone by itself with nothing around it to shape). No the vine is more durable, -its in the dirt-close to earth, spreading through shoots that can take root sideways or cling to what is around to grow along with it.....

And so are we to grow our faith, and share His grace given us by branching out, yet always remaining connected to Him, drawing our strength and nourishment from Him as a branch does from the vine.