

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
April 28, 2024 – The Fifth Sunday of Easter
John 15:1-8; 1 John 4:7-21
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

Today's Gospel is the Parable of the True Vine. As in all his other parables, Jesus is telling us about one thing but really talking about something else. This is a parable about our relationship with God and about how we are to be connected to God. The point is that God is the source of life and of all good things. The branch is nothing without the vine, as we would be nothing without God who has given us life.

Jesus identifies God the Father as the vine grower and himself as the vine. During his ministry Jesus often spoke about his connection to the Father. The connection between God the Father and Jesus is complete, more complete, I think, than we can really understand. Perhaps that is why Jesus speaks in parables like this one. He is trying to teach us about something beyond our experience. So, he asks us to think about something we can see and then apply that knowledge to something we cannot see.

Jesus tells us that he is connected to us just as he is connected to the Father. And he is also inviting us to be connected to him as completely as he is connected to the Father. "Abide in me as I abide in you." We have a choice about this, don't we? We can choose to acknowledge God as the source of our lives and to stay connected to God, or we can choose to separate ourselves from God and try to live our lives on our own. Jesus tells us what the consequences of the choices are. "Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit... Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned."

Passages like this can be difficult for us. I know that they have been difficult for me because they seem to be saying that if we don't do what is right, God will punish us. I have a very hard time with that idea. It doesn't seem to fit with the love and forgiveness God offers us through Christ. I have come to see these passages not as a threat of God's punishment, but rather as simply a statement of fact, of what happens. Something like a physical health issue. If you don't exercise, eat right, sleep enough, etc., you will not feel as healthy and energetic as you could. You might not actually get heart disease or diabetes, but you won't feel "fit." This isn't a punishment. It's just a fact about human bodies. I think this is what Jesus is saying. A fact about human beings is that if we stay connected to God, the source of our lives, we will bear much fruit, and if we don't, we will wither and become worthless debris.

We have a choice. And the good news is that one choice we can make is to hold onto the Vine, Jesus. We can turn our lives toward God, as a plant turns toward the sun, and we can stay connected to the Vine that will never die. We can graft our lives onto the Vine's life and have life abundantly!

Now there's a caution in the parable, though. "Every branch that bears fruit God prunes to make it bear more fruit." Even if you are attached to the vine and bearing fruit, God will prune you so that you bear more fruit. And pruning can hurt! If you read the lives of the saints, of people of deep faith and love of Christ, people who bore much good Christian fruit, you often find that they describe a process of pruning and stripping in their lives. God prunes our souls of what is superficial so that we can grow deeper roots in God. God prunes our souls of the clutter that keeps the good fresh air of the Holy Spirit from reaching our centers. God calls us to grow, and there are growing pains in addition to pruning pains.

As a point of information, the three Letters of John are not written by the author of John's Gospel. The letters were probably written ten to twenty years after the Gospel was written. Though not written by the same person, there are common themes in the letters and the Gospel. One of them is abiding in Christ. In this morning's passage from the letter, we read: "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." This is similar to what Jesus said in today's Gospel reading.

Another common theme is the importance of loving other human beings and the connection between the love of God and this love of others. Next week's Gospel reading follows immediately after this week's reading. We will hear Jesus say to his disciples, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." A similar message is found in today's epistle, "The commandment we have from [God] is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also." As Christians one of the ways we are called to grow is to grow in love for other human beings. Love for other people we naturally love and love for those we don't. As I have said before, love is about what we do, not necessarily about how we feel. Jesus does not ask us to hug our enemies because we feel so warmly drawn to them. Jesus asks us to "turn the other cheek," to refrain from retaliating and doing harm to those who have harmed us.

I've said this before, and I'm sure you know it for yourself – the Christian life isn't an easy life. It is a life of being pruned and stretched and challenged. It is a life of being called to re-orient ourselves toward God over and over again. It is a life which includes the cross. But it is also a life which is connected to God, the only true source of life, a life shared with the Savior who came so that we might have abundant life. It is a life which promises to bear much fruit, the fruit of the Holy Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, as St. Paul tells us in his letter to the Galatians (5:22-23).

Just as in the spring we see the glory and the mystery of nature breaking into leaf and flower, into color and fragrance, so we will bear fruit. Because if we turn our lives to the source of life, if we know we are branches of the true Vine, God will work in us and through us. And the world will be better for the gifts you and I are, for the gifts we bring to the world from God, the creator, redeemer, and sustainer of life.

Thanks be to God! Amen.