

Easter 5B (4/29/2018)

Acts 8:26-40

Psalm 22:25-31

1 John 4:7-21

John 15:1-8

Any branch that does not abide in the vine will not bear fruit. The metaphor of vine and branches implies a radical vision of Christian community – complete dependence; necessary, inevitable connection; fruitfulness for the sake of the Vinegrower alone. When we reclaim our identity and purpose in Christ, we bear fruit worthy of God’s intended harvest.

The notion of the sovereign individual is a powerful myth in the modern western world. Most of us live our lives according to the idea that each of us is essentially independent, mostly free from social constraints and mostly responsible for our individual circumstances. If we bind ourselves to others in meaningful and lasting ways, those bonds usually extend no farther than our immediate family members and close friends. Home and work or school are seen as the vital spaces of life, and all other spaces, all other relationships, are optional.¹

Think of how this perspective impacts the way we conceive of the church. **Faith, it would seem, is a mostly personal matter, and my participation in the community of Christ followers depends largely on my individual level of commitment and personal preferences.** Even the language of “going to church” suggests that this is a place apart, a place outside the scope of my everyday life, a supplement. I’ll be here when I can – I’ll even go out of my way to be involved in areas of ministry that matter most to me – but I’m not likely to sacrifice other priorities to be part of the church. It follows that I’m also not likely to rely on the church in difficult times.

But, this common outlook is foreign to the New Testament. The famous image of vine and branches in our Gospel from John, for instance, envisions a much different kind of

¹ See Stephen A. Cooper, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 2, 472.

Christian community. And although no metaphor is perfect, this one is rich with implications for our life together.

But first, a word of caution: This text, along with others in John, is often leveraged to condemn non-Christians. “Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers,” Jesus says. But, to interpret this scripture as a spiritual threat is to abuse it. The context of today’s Gospel is Jesus’ Farewell Discourse, and as Karoline Lewis explains, “These chapters are promises to friends from a friend saying goodbye, not punitive statements meant to [elicit] fear. ...Jesus’ words here to his disciples are not vilification of others but truth for the disciples who need to hear the Truth more than ever.”² In other words, **these are pastoral words to a group already striving to abide in Christ; these are words for us.**

So, what shall we glean from the image of vine and branches? First of all, this metaphor insists upon our complete dependence on God in Christ: “I am the vine,” he says, “you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” **The branch simply cannot live if it is detached from the vine, that is, Jesus is the very source of our thriving.** As a bishop in our church once said, “All that I am and all that I have comes by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.”³ **Discipleship means that we do not finally rely on our own ingenuity or strength, as the prevailing culture would insist, but rather on the fundamental privilege of abiding in Christ.**

Secondly, the image of vine and branches implies that **we are necessarily connected to each other.** Picture the mature vine, its branches virtually indistinguishable from one another,⁴ interwoven to form a single flourishing organism. There is no concept of

² <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5137>.

³ Wayne Miller, Metropolitan Chicago Synod.

⁴ Gail R. O'Day, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, 760.

independence among the branches, but only mutuality and common purpose. The African philosophy of Ubuntu captures this relational understanding of the self in community: “I am because we are.” In other words, **the individual exists only in relationship to others. We cannot escape one another; what’s more, we don’t want to, because apart from the vine and other branches, the individual branch languishes. So, being tangled together in Christ is good news because when we thrive, we thrive together.**

Finally, Jesus’ metaphor confesses that **God actively tends and keeps us, and God alone is glorified by our abundance.** “My father is the vinegrower,” Jesus says. “He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.” Branches, in other words, do not reach their full potential without the vinegrower who prunes and cleanses them to bring out their best. To borrow the words of one interpreter, “All that is extraneous is carefully and lovingly removed,”⁵ **that is, we expect God to continually shape us into the community God intends us to be. And, we do not thrive for our own sake, but for the sole purpose of “bearing fruit” for God.**

This last observation raises the question: **What is fruit worthy of the Vinegrower? What constitutes a bountiful harvest?** Through the radically communal lens of Jesus’ own metaphor, there must be more to bearing fruit than professional success and domestic harmony, regular church attendance and personal piety. There must be the possibility of abundant life in a broader sense.⁶

Consider an ancient example. Sociologist Rodney Stark argues that the early church took root in the Roman Empire in part because Christ followers faced hardship in faithful and ultimately fruitful ways. In the middle of the second and third centuries, deadly epidemics swept across the Empire, killing as much as a third of the population. According to various accounts, the fledgling church responded to the sick in a markedly different way

⁵ Nancy R. Blakely, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 2, 474.

⁶ John 10:10.

than the pagan majority. The conviction that God loves the lowly human being and that God's love is reflected in our love for one another stood in stark contrast to Roman theology. And, it was precisely this kind of love that motivated Christ followers to care for the sick, even at the risk of contracting the disease. Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, for instance, reported that "most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty [during the epidemic], never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another,"⁷ while the pagans "pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest...."⁸ According to Stark, even basic nursing might have dramatically increased survival rates, disproportionately preserving minority Christian networks and attracting surviving pagans with the promise of belonging and care.

It's a fascinating theory, albeit difficult to prove. Nevertheless, the story speaks to the question of what it means to abide together in Christ and produce an outcome for God. **What was the fruit? What did God get out of courageous love for the sick? Only the survival of some who might have otherwise suffered and died, and the manifestation of Jesus' love at the heart of our care for one another, and especially for the most vulnerable among us.**

Dear church, if we thrive, we thrive together. The metaphor of vine and branches implies a radical vision of Christian community – complete dependence on God in Christ; necessary, inevitable connection to each other; and fruitfulness for the sake of the Vinegrower alone. So, let's reclaim our identity and purpose in Christ today and every day that we might bear fruit worthy of God's intended harvest.

⁷ *The Rise of Christianity*, 82.

⁸ 83.