

Abiding in Love

It seems appropriate on Mothers' Day that we should hear and consider some of the words in I John which describe God's redeeming love for humankind. We celebrate our mothers and the women who mothered us on this day because we recognize their love for us: the love they showed in bearing us, in nurturing us, in pointing us on the path to adulthood. Our earliest lessons in love come from our mothers, we love because they love us, and, as John reminds us, in a like manner all love originates in God who is love.

On the face of it, the connection of our passage in the Gospel according to John with mothers is less clear. The proclamation of Jesus that he is the True Vine doesn't give us a metaphor that immediately makes us think of mothers. One preacher, somewhat desperate, I think, to make the connection, did point out in a column I read this week that Ezekiel 19:10 says to the princes of Israel, "Your mother was like a vine in a vineyard transplanted by the water, fruitful and full of branches from abundant water." That's stretching things a bit, don't you think?

But it does beg the question, what does this metaphor of the vine mean? What does Jesus mean when he calls himself the True Vine? What does it mean when he says that we are the branches? And how does all of this relate to God's love for us, our love for each other and our way of living in the world? I hope to provide some possible answers for these questions this morning, drawing not only on our lectionary passages this morning but also upon Scriptures that would have been familiar to Jesus and his disciples.

In mining the truth of any Bible passage, but especially one that may seem obscure to us, it is always important to recreate, as we can, its meaning to its original audience. As we think of these words of Jesus recorded in John's Gospel, we must take into account at least two aspects of the society of First Century Palestine. First, unlike ours, this was an agrarian society. Most people lived off the land as farmers, herdsman, and small-time merchants who dealt with their crops and flocks. Even those who dwelt in the cities, much smaller then than now, were exposed on a daily basis to the realities of the farm and vineyard. When Jesus used figurative speech drawn from life on the land, people had a much more immediate understanding and reaction than most of us can have. Second, the people to whom Jesus spoke were deeply conversant with the stories and images of the Law, the Prophets and the Writings which made up their Bible and our Old Testament.

So when Jesus said, "I am the True Vine," many if not all of his listeners would have been put in mind of a passage from the prophet Isaiah. Do you remember the Song of the Unfruitful Vineyard in verses 1-7 of Isaiah 5? "Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw

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bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!" The Children of Israel have consistently failed God through their disobedience and oppression of their fellows. Jesus now points to his own life as the model for what God expects from God's people; he is the True Vine in contrast to the failed vineyard of Israel.

By extension, those who follow Jesus, those who abide in him, are branches of the True Vine. That's an odd word, isn't it: abide? Its most common use these days, outside of the church, is in a quote from the Coen Brothers' 1998 cult hit movie, "The Big Lebowski": "The Dude abides." F. Dean Lueking, a Lutheran pastor, teacher and author has written, "It's an old-fashioned word. Highway motel signs read "Stay here," not "Abide with us tonight." Baseball announcers don't sum up an inning with "One hit, a walk and two abiding on base." Of the 17 uses of abide listed in the Oxford dictionary, eight are obsolete. The word seems to belong to another time. "To abide" has to do with persevering, continuing, lasting, staying with it. No wonder the term is rare. What it means is rare, in this or any time. Its absence diminishes us."

But abide is a word that makes perfect sense when we consider the horticultural realities of a vine. The branches of a vine are not independent entities. They can only stay alive as long as they are connected with the whole plant. They cannot wander off on their own, even for a season. Russell Pregeant writes, "The branches do not get one dose of sustenance that lasts their lifetime; they must continue to draw upon the life supplied by the vine—which seems to be what the term "abiding" implies." As Jesus is the True Vine, we as the branches must abide in him for the spiritual nourishment necessary to our lives. The love of God, flowing through the life of Jesus, fills us with the kind of love that is necessary for us to generate the fruit of which Jesus speaks. More on this in a moment.

But before we turn to the concept of the fruit of the True Vine, there is more yet to be learned from the image of the vine itself. Jesus, remember, says he is the Vine, not the stalk or the roots but the whole. As branches of the True Vine, we are a part of Jesus and he is a part of us. Kate Huey, who provides a weekly lectionary commentary on behalf of the United Church of Christ, writes, "Looking closely, we see the many entwined branches, winding their way around one another in intricate patterns of tight curls that make it impossible to tell where one branch starts or another one ends. This is not just intricate; it's intimate, and the vine shares with its branches the nutrients that sustain it, the life force of the whole plant. Even closer than the shepherd there on the hillside, this vine is one with the branches." I had the opportunity this week to watch from time to time as workmen struggled to rid the east side of our building from ivy. Not a fruit-bearing vine but a vine nonetheless, the ivy demonstrated the strength and tenacity of the vine that is to be our model. Those intricate, intimate, entwined branches of which Kate Huey wrote were incredibly difficult for them to remove from each other and from the ground. They drew strength from each other. Because they were so closely entwined they were difficult to separate and only once separated could they be cut. There have been several comments from some of you all already about the near-impossibility of total eradication of a vine. It's incredibly difficult to extract every last root from the ground, any one of which may spring back to life as the beginnings of another full-grown vine. It's a picture that should bring us some hope, as we consider both the tenacity of the Church of Jesus in the world and the deep rooted nature of Christ's love in our own lives. It's also a challenge to us to strengthen and uphold each other in

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the same way the individual strands of the vine strengthened each other in defiance of the blades wielded against them.

Jesus as the True Vine and ourselves as the branches is also an alternate image of Paul's description of the Church as the Body of Christ. It is an image that challenges us, immersed as we are in American Individualism, with its communitarian vision of Christ's Church. Gail R. O'Day of the Candler School of Theology has written on this passage for the New Interpreter's Bible series. She observes, "The image of community that emerges from John 15:1-17 is one of interrelationship, mutuality, and indwelling. To get the full sense of this interrelationship, it is helpful to visualize what the branches of a vine actually look like. 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. What this vine image suggests about community, then, is that there are no free-standing individuals in the community, but branches who encircle one another completely. The fruitfulness of each individual branch depends on its relationship to the vine, nothing else. What matters for John is that each individual is rooted in Jesus and hence gives up individual status to become one of many encircling branches. The communal life envisioned in the vine metaphor raises a strong challenge to contemporary Western models of individual autonomy and privatism. At the heart of the Johannine model is social interrelationship and corporate accountability."

This concept of putting interrelationship ahead of autonomy, of giving more weight to group than to individual is frankly counter-cultural. We are fiercely independent beings. To return to the day's theme of mothers and parents in general, which of us parents has not heard with a mixture of joy and regret the two-year old's emphatic pronouncement, "I do it MYSELF." Our offsprings' growing independence is so expected that we mock those reluctant to leave the nest as in the 2006 movie, "Failure to Launch." But being branches of the True Vine means giving up a level of expected autonomy to stay connected to Christ and to each other. This is not the rugged individualism taught by Western culture. Our counter-cultural rock-and-roll troubadours, Christian or not, have had to remind us from time to time of the importance of interconnectedness in life, from the recent U2 song, "Sometimes You Can't Make it on Your Own," (and, by the way, today is Bono's birthday) to the 1970's James Taylor hit, "You've Got a Friend," a song that was almost immediately co-opted by the Jesus People of my generation.

Dr. O'Day continues her analysis of our Gospel passage: "To live according to this model, then, the church would be a community in which members are known for the acts of love that they do in common with all other members. It would not be a community built around individual accomplishments, choices, or rights, but around the corporate accountability to the abiding presence of Jesus and corporate enactment of the love of God and Jesus." This understanding of the work of the Church is tied back again to the roots of Jesus' True Vine metaphor found in Isaiah. Why was the vine of Israel rejected by the Divine Vinedresser? Because its fruit was unacceptable: "For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!" The fruit of the True Vine, the fruit that the branches will bear as part of the vine, is justice and righteousness and love.

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I have heard and even preached myself on the fruit expected from the branches as being new disciples for Jesus or the fruits of the Spirit enumerated by Paul: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Either of these interpretations still seems appropriate to me but we must also remember this understanding of the fruit which God desires as justice and righteousness and active love. This is not a private devotional love but the kind of love for God which also means love for our sisters and brothers, a love which demands that we feed the hungry and house the homeless, working for social, economic and restorative justice for those whom society has disadvantaged or forgotten. The love which we find in Jesus and become a part of generating in the world is a love that strengthens us but also a love that is demanding of us. To abide in God may mean that our spirits rest in God but our bodies and our minds are thereby pushed to action.

It can be a little daunting, this idea of carrying the active love of God out into our world. Apart from Jesus, after all, we can do nothing. But even as Jesus reminds us of this, he promises that by abiding in him we will bear much fruit. Writing on John 15 for the United Methodist General Board, Safiyah Fosua tells a story from her professional life working for a ministry organization: "I remember the words of a year-end evaluation a number of years ago: "What, in your plans for the coming year, will it take an intervention from God to accomplish?" From that question I learned a valuable lesson: Attempting only those things that I knew I could already do well was a convenient excuse for relying upon my own strength. Perhaps God, and my evaluator, were prodding me to stretch outside the boundaries of certainty in ways that would require absolute dependence upon God. What, in our ministries as churches or as individuals, requires us to remain vitally attached to God? Could it be that most of us have chosen to take the sure road -- leaving the more difficult terrain for those deemed giants of the faith?" Here at Good Shepherd, we have not always taken the sure road. We can look directly to the west of this Sanctuary and see the evidence of how God may bless the bold choice made in the name of Jesus. But how will we respond, as a congregation, to the current and future challenges ahead of us? Will we be able to make bold, loving choices for justice and righteousness in an economy that is only tentatively improving? How will we extend love, justice and righteousness to our new neighbors, who will be here in less than a year? Will we be held back from active love by fear – fear of the new, fear of the stranger, fear of economic distress?

John, the Beloved Disciple, reminded the community of Christians who followed him late in his life that love, the growing, maturing love that comes to us when we abide in God through Christ, that love casts out fear. We are called not to fear but to love. Sometimes we must even set aside our carefully calculated plans in favor of unrestrained, active love. That famous preacher of the latter half of the twentieth century, William Sloane Coffin, Jr., said, "I think, therefore I am? Nonsense! I love, therefore I am." As branches of the True Vine, as the Body of Christ in this world, we must be ready at all times to extend love and justice and righteousness to our neighbors. Our calling in this regard is wonderfully summed up by a poem written in the 16th Century by the Spanish mystic, Teresa of Avila, "Christ Has No Body":

Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,

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Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

My sisters and brothers, we are the Body of Christ. We are the branches of the True Vine. Let us dedicate ourselves anew to producing the fruit which our Loving Creator so avidly desires, love and justice and righteousness, and with that fruit, let us prepare to feed our world. Amen.