

Easter V, 2018
John 15.1-8

In these latter weeks of the Easter season the focus of the Gospels moves from the event of Easter to the community formed by faith in the risen Lord. John's Gospel uses various metaphors for understanding this.

Last week Jesus described our relationship with Him as that of a shepherd with his flock. It was a metaphor His disciples would easily understand; the sight of a shepherd with his sheep was very common in their society. As Jesus uses it, He is the Good Shepherd, the "good leader," who guides, protects, and cares for His sheep. His followers know His voice and respond to it. Jesus is faithful to His people, even to the point of laying down His life for them.

Today Jesus uses a different image, that of a vine and its branches. That also was a common sight of their society. Many people had their own grapevines for making wine. The use of a vine for God and His people had a long tradition; Isaiah 5, for example, describes God's people as a vine planted in the Holy Land.

So Jesus says, "I am the vine; you are the branches. The Church grows out of the wine, drawing its strength and nourishment from Jesus. Living in and being nourished by Jesus the true vine, the branches produce fruit. The fruit is what Paul in Galatians 5 calls the "fruits of the Spirit": love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

But the chief fruit the branches produce by their relationship to the wine is love. Just as the fruit of the wine produces nourishment for human thirst and hunger, so the fruit of our relationship to Jesus the true vine is what every person needs to give and to receive: love.

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The word Jesus uses for how the branches relate to the vine – that is, how believers live in communion with Christ – is "abide." It is an old word, not used much anymore. The Oxford

Dictionary of the English language lists seventeen uses of the word, eight of which are obsolete. Perhaps hearing the word makes you think of the great hymn, "Abide with me, fast falls the eventide...."

In John's Gospel, the word means "to remain with, to continue, to stay with." The word suggests that to remain with Jesus is to "stick with Him," to remain faithful to Christ. This is not a static idea, as though you reach a point in your relationship with Christ that is fixed and does not change. To abide with Christ and remain in His love is a dynamic, active, living, growing concept. As the Church abides in Jesus, sticks with Jesus the true vine, it will produce the fruits, the effects God wants the Church to do.

Remaining in Jesus means to nourish our faith by the means of grace God has given us: His Word, His sacraments, especially feeding on Jesus in Holy Communion. When we struggle with doubt, anxiety about the future, and moral decisions we should not try to be Lone Rangers in matters of faith. God has given us the resources we need for a healthy faith, for guidance, for support. It is important not to neglect them.

This text, with its metaphor of the vine and its branches, offers us a rich insight into the nature of our life together with Christ.

The first is Jesus naming of Himself "the true vine." In contrast to false vines. The Gospel lifts up Christ as the answer to every human questions, as the answer to our deepest needs.

There is a hunger today for spiritual health. People are hungry for spirituality. We have tasted the fruit of secularism, in which the only thing that matters is the world we can touch and see, found it sour. Go to the 'religion' section in any bookstore and you will see a huge range of books on New Age mysticism, reincarnation, discovering your personal goddess, getting in touch with hidden parts of your personality, and much more. So much of it is nonsense. Where are people to turn for true answers to their deep spiritual needs?

I saw a notice about a book that has just come out, titled Nomadland. It chronicles the lives of older Americans living in campers and vans, trying to stay afloat after job loss, health problems and a deteriorating American Dream. The book exposes the dark underbelly of the nation's economy and the subcultures of people affected by it. There are many people today who live in a spiritual nomadland, seeking something to give them meaning and purpose in life, a way of life that is true and right and good.

In John 8, Jesus says that if we abide, if we continue in Jesus and shape our lives, our hopes, our faith by His Word, we will know the truth and it will set us free. This invites us to set our personal quests with the greater story of God and His people, stretching through time from Abraham to the life of the world to come. That is the story that makes sense of every person's life.

Second, Jesus gives a warning with this text: any branch of the vine that does not produce the fruit God seeks from His people is pruned, cut off, and discarded, so the vine can produce good fruit.

Being a pastor for 13 years in Adams County, it was impossible for me not to learn something about the fruit industry. One of the interesting sights I saw every April was the pruning of the peach trees. Because they are more sensitive to cold than apple trees, peach trees are the last to be pruned. When the branches start to become blood-red in April, it is time to prune them. The trees are pruned so that the remaining branches form a sort of "bowl" to get the most sunlight. The pruned branches are left on the ground for several days. The interesting thing is to see the pruned branches bloom into blossoms with the rest of the orchard. But of course, they never produce fruit. Their flowers wither, the branches die, and they are gathered up and thrown out.

I have never seen a better illustration of what happens to Christians who separate themselves from Jesus. Their faith withers and dies. It is that simple.

Jesus also teaches today that God Himself prunes the Church, prunes our faith, so that it will be more productive. Jesus means that faith is always changing. Even though you are connected to the true vine and firmly rooted in Jesus, your faith needs pruning. Maybe some old habits or thoughts or attitudes or behaviors need to die, so that, through the power of Jesus, you can be a more productive, fruitful Christian. This is the daily practice of self-examination, repentance, confession, and forgiveness, returning to God's grace in Baptism that we may be renewed in righteousness.

So, this text puts before us a question: What in your life needs pruning out? What keeps Jesus from producing new fruit in your life today? How are we as a congregation being pruned and growing in our fruit-bearing at this time and place?

A final observation: Jesus speaks these words to the disciples on the night before His death. The disciples are facing an uncertain future. They will be on their own, without the presence of Jesus. How will they survive? Jesus provides the answer to their anxious fears with this simple prescription for their health, for the health of a Christian and the Church as a whole.

*I am the vine, you are the branches.
Those who abide in me and I in them
bear much fruit.
Apart from me you can do nothing.*

It is such a simple prescription for a healthy faith: abide in Jesus. Remain in him. Stick with Jesus, and He will bring you through anything and everything. Amen.