

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Fifth Sunday of Easter - Year B

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Acts 8:26-40

Psalm 22:25-31

I John 4:7-21

John 15:1-8

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. John:

[Jesus said:] 1“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. 2He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. 3You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 4Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. 5I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. 6Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”

The Gospel of our Lord

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Grafted

Christ is Risen! Good morning! As we reviewed this text this past Monday on Zoom we talked about how this FEELS like a familiar text, but how it's a surface or general familiarity based on a larger experience. That larger experience being that the image of a vine is one we constantly hear and literally see all over the church. Liturgical banners, paraments, and other worship decorations often feature the image of a vine in some form or another. If you look close you can usually see a vine running through the intricate fabric of things like stoles on pastors and deacons. And yet, the text today is one we often don't have memorized, regardless of the fact that it comes up so consistently in our calendar.

So let's spend today unpacking this image from scripture, and see where it takes us. The text today is found towards the end of the Gospel of John in what scholars like to call the Farewell discourse. Jesus really likes to talk in this Gospel. He is known for his lengthy teaching and preaching sessions, but this one is his last chance to communicate with the disciples before his arrest, trial, and execution. He is reiterating his most important points and boiling down his message to its very core. It's where we get the text from Maundy Thursday where we're called on to love one another.

In this central message he uses the image of a vine. It's a common illustration in the Hebrew Scriptures. Israel is often described as branches connected to a vine. But as non-jewish Christians began to believe, the image grew. We were seen as branches grafted into the vine. Now the work of grafting a different plant into the root or stem of another is beyond my horticultural skill, I mean I have trouble

keeping my grass alive. But I do know that with great care, patience, and attention one plant can be grafted onto another, creating something wholly new and different.

What might be the most famous of these examples is the “tree of 40 fruits.” There are several now, but the first one was started by a professor at Syracuse University who took buds from the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station and over time grafted 40 different types of fruits to a tree that when in bloom looks absolutely amazing.

It makes me think of the church. Here in this place we have been grafted from a variety of different places, life experiences, and backgrounds. And yet in the waters of baptism we were all grafted together, called to abide and take root as one.

That word abide is a heavy one. As Sue pointed out on Monday, as we have been discussing what it looks like to faithfully wait, this text reminds us of the importance of that work. Abiding is a fitting description for where we find ourselves. It also shows us that abiding isn't a passive thing that doesn't require action. Plants are unable to walk around, and yet action still takes place. Roots grow deeper and stronger, branches reach for the light and life, all without the traditional understanding of movement.

We too are called to abide deeply in Christ. When we are connected and healthy we bear much fruit. But, if you're like me, you might ask, “well what does it look like to be a healthy connected branch that bears fruit?” I think the answer can be found in our second lesson from I John, so take another listen. *“7Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. 9God's love*

was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. 10In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another... 12b if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. 13By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.” And then pay attention to this last part: “19We love because he first loved us. 20Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. 21The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.”¹

If we are truly siblings in Christ, we must love one another. And that’s the challenge we have before us. To abide deeply in God means working to break off and remove the branches of our person that stop us from growing and thriving. I’m not saying that we can’t be angry. Human emotions are completely normal. But when our emotions lead to things like hate, envy, or contempt we end up sending vital nutrients to branches that should be pruned and cast off.

But it’s a hard and painful process to cut off parts of yourself. Yes, they need to go, but they are often connected to the core of who we have become, and removing them is a hard and hurtful thing to do. A wound will certainly appear, and scars will most definitely show. But when we are set free... wonderful things can happen. We grow even stronger, even healthier, connected to the source in ways we might not ever have imagined.

¹ I John 4: 7-11, 12b-13, 19-21 NRSV