

August 9, 2015



“The God We Can Know: I Am the Vine”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

John 15: 1-5

‘I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide 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. I 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.

Jesus said: I am the vine. I am the vine: you are the branches.

This is the third in our Summer Sermon Series on The God We Can Know as explored through the teachings of Jesus in John’s gospel. The other gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, liked to convey Jesus’ teaching through stories, parables. John was the more philosophical and mystical of the four. He took what we call the “I Am” sayings of Jesus—I am the Door, I am the Bread of Life, I am the Vine—and unpacked them to link Jesus to the God of Israel, the God of their forefathers, and also to show how God’s love actually works in our lives. The God we can know is the God of all generations and the God alive and real in our lives now.

Jesus said: I am the vine.

This expression would have been very familiar and deeply meaningful to Jesus’ first Jewish audience. We heard all the ancient images as Nick led us in Psalm 80 this morning. Did you catch it? You, God, brought a vine out of Egypt. You cleared ground for it and planted it. It took deep root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches. It sent out its branches to the sea and its roots to the river.....Look down from heaven, God, and see: have regard for this vine.”

For Jesus himself and for his first listeners, the vine was a symbol for the nation, Israel, much as the eagle is now for the United States. Over the entrance to the Temple was a huge grapevine carved with clusters of grapes and covered in gold.

So when Jesus said: “I am the Vine,” he was taking on himself that deep identity with the God of Israel, God whose name is “I Am Who I Am,” the God whose relationship with the people and the land had come to be symbolized by the vine. This is the God known to our ancestors, the God we can know, the God who gives life and nourishes, the God who plants and prospers, the God who is alive in the story and the history of his people.

Vines are fascinating things. I think of all the images Jesus chooses, this one may be my favorite, or maybe it’s just my favorite this week. I grew up in the desert of Arizona, not so unlike the desert in which Judaism, Christianity and Islam were born. I loved to come upon little desert gourd vines. They grow on parched land and look like skinny brown cords of not much, looking as good as dead, until they get just a little water. And then miraculously, white flowers bloom and gourds grow. Small round orange and green gourds, or ones with a little curved shape, harvested and used as dipping vessels by the native people. They are a miracle of the desert, these little vines. Strong, tenacious, inconspicuous, an integral part of the whole ecology of the desert.

Here in Santa Monica there is an old lush green ivy sort of vine that grows all along the driveway of the parsonage, extending into the front yard and into the back yard. It is beautiful now with a kind of summer fullness, but I especially love it in the fall when its leaves turn golden and red and give us a touch of autumn’s glory right here in Southern California.

I talked with the gardener about the vine one day. I was worried about it, because it’s so extensive but it grows from just a small cut out square at the side of the drive, maybe 6” x 6”. How does it get enough water, I asked? “Oh, don’t worry,” he said, “its roots extend out in all directions. It’s stealing water from your neighbors!”

I cringed. I wasn’t sure that was the best for a parsonage, after all, especially in these days when we’re all so conscious about cutting back on the water we use. But then I thought: “well, it’s not really a thief. It’s just being a vine. It’s doing what vines do. It says so in the Bible---“the vine God planted took deep root and filled the land...” So I just think of it now as biblical vine, living in praise of God.

Jesus said: I am the Vine. The God we can know takes deep root in us and fills us with grace and love and life abundant. The gourds or grapes or leaves it produces are signs of that life in us. Later in John’s Gospel we hear Jesus say: “God is glorified by this—that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”

In using this image of the Vine, Jesus is offering us intimacy with God, perseverance, strength in adversity and purpose.

He said: I am the Vine, you are the branches. We are intimately linked. There are no branches without the vine; there is no vine without its branches. Through Christ we belong to a whole that is much greater than ourselves. We are part of divine life itself, intimately connected to God in Christ and to all the other branches. When a branch bears fruit, we all rejoice. When a branch flowers, we are all more beautiful. When a branch is damaged or diseased, we all suffer.

This interrelated network of life is at the heart of Pope Francis’ latest encyclical, “Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home.” It will be our Book Study discussion book on September 20th and copies are for sale today at the Hospitality Table in Coffee Hour. I encourage you to read and study it. You don’t have to agree with everything, but we all should be challenged by his strong spiritual and prophetic word, to see ourselves as part of this common home entrusted by God to all of us, and find hope and courage to do all we can to insure its health and vitality.

This pope who studied chemistry and worked first as a chemist, writes of Integral Ecology: "It cannot be emphasized enough how everything is interconnected. Time and space are not independent of one another, and not even atoms or subatomic particles can be considered in isolation. Just as the different aspects of the planet—physical, chemical and biological—are inter-related, so too living species are part of a network which we will never fully explore and understand....Laudato Si', mi' Signore"—"Praise be to you, my Lord"—is from the canticle of Saint Francis of Assisi, [reminding] us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us. Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs."

Jesus himself said it long ago. I am the vine. In this vine, we find intimacy with God our Creator and indeed connection with the whole of creation.

We find a kind of strength and perseverance as well. Vines take time to grow. Were it not for time-lapse photography, we would never see them grow. Most grape vines take at least three years before they begin to produce fruit and can live for 50 to 100 years. And because they can be cut and grafted onto younger vines, they continue to grow and produce. Do you know that some of the most important vineyards in France date back all the way back to the 12th century? The quality of the fruit passes down through the vine and it can mature and improve over time.

It is said that it is relatively easy to keep a vine alive; but it requires patience and attention to produce a great wine. The same is true for our spiritual lives. We may have epiphany moments of tremendous awakening and insight, but our souls grow over a lifetime, a lifetime of care and nurture. To grow deep, to grow wide, to grow closer and closer to God over time, requires of us the same discipline required of a vine-keeper or vinedresser, as they are called. To grow spiritually, John Wesley admonished the people called Methodist to pray, to study Scripture, to worship regularly, to participate in the sacraments, and to serve the poor, feed the hungry, and give generously to the needs of others.

In these ways, we develop perseverance over time, staying closely connected to Christ the Vine and reaching out in life-sustaining community to all the branches.

Jesus said: I am the Vine. And as any vinedresser will tell you, real strength that perseveres through adversity requires pruning along the way. Jesus speaks of this as well when he says: "God removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes or cleanses to make it bear more fruit." This is not the fun part—the painful truths about ourselves we don't want to hear; the normal challenges of life that strip away false securities. Sometimes we need to pinch off—we need to take stock of our lives and how we're spending our time and our money and all our gifts—and pinch off the habits and behaviors that have somehow accumulated that sap our energy and diffuse our focus. Sometimes we need to lop off whole dead branches. We humans can get ourselves into terrible messes, can't we? Jobs or relationships that are not life-giving, things we've gotten ourselves into that are actually dead ends...

When we find ourselves in these places, there are all kinds of resources that can help us prune—doctors, counselors, support groups, prayer groups, pastors---and God can reclaim us for the beautiful life for which we have been created. So never hesitate to ask for help. God longs for us to be thriving and fruitful and whole.

Jesus said: I am the Vine and in this, we find purpose. He said: abide in me and I in you. Abide in my love. Keep my commandments. I am the vine; you are the branches. There is no distinction between "who we are" and "how we act." Abide in my love and love your neighbor, he says. This is a kind of integral ecology at the heart of our being and becoming that draws us close to God and spins us out in service to others and the whole of creation.

Intimacy, perseverance, strength in adversity, purpose. There is tribulation to be endured. There is mission to be fulfilled. There is life and love to share with all our brothers and sisters. There is a creation longing to be made whole.

Jesus said: I am the Vine. You are the branches.

In closing, I again quote Pope Francis: "God, who call us to generous commitment and to give him our all, offers us the light and the strength needed to continue on our way. In the heart of this world, the Lord of life, who loves us so much, is always present. He does not abandon us, he does not leave us alone, for he has united himself definitively to our earth, and his love constantly impels us to find new ways forward."

May God grant us a larger and clearer vision of these the gifts of the holy vinedresser and profound experience of them. May the life of Christ that flows through the vine to all the branches fill us with joy and hope.

Notes:

Rob Fuquay (repeat from last week) The God We Can Know: Exploring the "I Am" Sayings of Jesus. Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2014.

Pope Francis. Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home. Our Sunday Visitor, 2015.

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