

April 29, 2018 • Fifth Sunday of Easter • Faith in Action

“The Vine”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris



John 15:1-8

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. 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. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

Last Sunday was Good Shepherd Sunday. We heard the beautiful 23rd Psalm and heard Jesus say to us: “I am the Good Shepherd.” There’s a lot to be said about how shepherds care for their flock, through thick and thin, from scarcity to abundance, from this life into life everlasting.

Now today, the Fifth Sunday of Easter, as we continue to explore and live into the meaning and power of the resurrection, we hear Jesus speaking of himself using another image: the vine. “I am the vine,” he says.

Why the vine, we might ask? A vine is a far cry from a shepherd. Vines don’t really “do” anything. They live, they grow. Some produce fruit, others flowers, others simply leaves. What does it mean for Jesus to say: “I am the vine?”

Let’s start in Scripture. When you look into it, you’ll discover many kinds of vines described throughout the pages of the Bible. You’ll find vines that produce melons, cucumbers, and gourds. Vines that produce luxurious foliage and flowers. And probably the most well-known vine of them all—the grape vine from which comes the wines enjoyed at family celebrations, weddings, such as the wedding at Cana, and in religious rituals, Jewish and later Christian. The wine that Jesus lifts saying, in words so familiar to us: “This is the cup of the new covenant, my blood poured out for you for the forgiveness of sin.”

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the vine becomes a symbol, a visual image that helps us see a larger truth. In the Song of Songs, the fragrant blossoms of the vine are recalled in the poetry of love. Great love, enduring love. Other passages bring to mind the vines that grew to cover over the open courtyard of a house, providing shade and shelter. In 1 Kings and Micah we read of the vine as a symbol of prosperity and of peace: “Everyone will sit under their own vine and fig tree, and no one will make them afraid, for the LORD Almighty has spoken.”

The vine had become a symbol of the promised shalom of God where all people live safe and free, free of want, free of all fear. Where the “sun shall not smite thee by day nor the moon by night.” Where “faithful love and truth have met; [where] righteousness and peace have kissed.”

Are you beginning to get glimpses of all the Jesus meant when he said: “I am the vine?” The vine of enduring love. All-encompassing love. The vine of shelter and peace. Jesus, the vine, the one who says to us: “Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.” The one who, in all his teachings and actions, demonstrates to us God’s coming reign of justice and peace. Jesus says: “I am the vine” and it means all this...and more.

This expression would have been very familiar and deeply meaningful to Jesus’ first Jewish audience. For there’s another level of meaning conveyed here as well, which we might not catch, but his first listeners most certainly would have heard. For the, 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. The words of Psalm 80 express it this way: “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.”

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 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.

In referring to himself as the vine, Jesus is letting his first disciples know that he is the promised Messiah, he is the one who comes in the name of the Lord, the one God has sent to bring life to God’s people. He’s saying: I am your Deliverer, your Wonderful Counselor, your Prince of Peace.

Now with all that established, Jesus goes further, revealing not only his identity and calling, but ours as well. “I am the vine; you are the branches.” “I am the vine; you are the branches.”

What does it mean to be a branch of the one vine, a branch of the vine that is Christ Jesus? One body in our one Lord, each a branch of the one true vine that is Christ Jesus.

He said: “I am the Vine, you are the branches.” We are intimately linked. There is a beautiful connectedness and inter-relatedness in this image of the vine. There are no branches without the vine; there is no vine without its branches. Through Christ we belong to Christ, and 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, all people and all creation. We are all part of one another. When a branch bears fruit, we all rejoice. When a branch is damaged or diseased, we all suffer. When a branch flowers, we are all more beautiful. In the one vine, we are

united in very fundamental ways with other people and other cultures, times and places. This is for us a gift from God and a source of deep gratitude and joy.

As I was preparing this sermon, I went back to a sermon I'd written on this same text in 1986. I was pastor at the Alondra Park UMC in Gardena, my first appointment in this annual conference. My hand-written sermon notes were tucked inside the morning's bulletin. I saw the prayers, the music, the worship leaders for the day. And I had saved the half-sheet weekly prayer list of the congregation. I read over the list of names.

Most were folks I hadn't thought of since I'd moved from that appointment in 1988. Name after name brought back stories and memories. Times we'd experienced together. Shared meals, laughter and tears. High points and low moments. The Memorial Services I'd led for many of them, as well as weddings for their children and grandchildren, their confirmations and baptisms. Generations of the faithful.

They came alive again in my heart and now I visualized them all as branches of this great vine that is the body of Christ, united across time and space, their names coming to life from the printed page, written in the Book of Life, each known to God, beloved Child of God, each a branch of the one vine. For all the saints abide in Christ. "Abide in me and I in you," Jesus said.

And of course we here, and all those who preceded us in this congregation, and all who will come after, we, with them, are also branches of the one vine. The church in every place, across all time and all that will come, all branches of the one vine that is Christ Jesus.

You know, sometimes when life gets hard or painful or a bit too challenging, we are tempted to feel that we are alone, making our way, toughing it out, doing the best we can. The beautiful, comforting, powerful image of the vine reminds us that, in fact, we are never alone.

From Christ the Vine, we, each branch, receives the nourishment we need to become stronger branches. For the roots of the true vine are planted in heaven and its branches shelter life on earth. Through the Vine comes new life to each and every branch, new power, new potential, new hope. Christ is always with us. "I will not leave you orphaned," he said. I am the vine and you are the branches.

We are rooted and grounded, at all times, in the great love of God in Christ Jesus. AND Christ the Vine reminds us that we are intimately connected to one another and draw strength and courage and inspiration and hope from one another, no matter where we are, no matter the separation of distance or time, our lives intertwine to form a faith-filled latticework of love.

The Presbyterian Church, PCUSA, has just published a new Book of Worship, from which I draw this affirmation as I close this morning. It pulls together beautifully all the themes of our Easter season.

Christ is the Word that brought order to chaos,
bringing all things into being, breathing Spirit into dust.

Christ is the Light that overcame the darkness, shining from the dawn of creation
to the daybreak of your eternal realm.

Christ is the Water that quenches our thirst,
flowing from the hearts of believers and springing up into eternal life.

Christ is the Bread that rises from the earth, feeding the poor and hungry,
giving us wisdom and strength for each day.

Christ is the Vine that connects all creation, binding us together in the unity of the Spirit,
causing us to bear fruit for the world.

Christ is the Life that death could not destroy, who gave his life in love for the world,
who lives and reigns forever.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN

Notes:

Revs. Todd and Jennifer Pick. The Vine. Weekly Reflection from the Fellowship of United Methodists in Music and Worship Arts. April 29, 2018.

Book of Common Worship PCUSA. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018.

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First United Methodist Church • 1008 Eleventh Street Santa Monica, CA 90403
www.santamonicaumc.org ■ 310-393-8258