

Sunday, April 28, 2024
1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8
“A Branch on a Vine or A Stick in the Mud?”
The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching

My home was once a farm and behind my house are a row of huge pine trees, two rows actually, they form what is known as an alley, a word that means a road not meant for heavy traffic, it's where our word for alley comes from. When you stand at the entrance, you can really see what a road or path was once, so long ago. But each year, because these trees are over 300 years old, we lose or need to trim major branches and on two different occasions, an entire tree had to come down. Which is really sad as I watch the alley slowly disappear. And I think about those who make their living trimming branches and cutting down trees. I think tree trimmers are a bit, well, they certainly have a daring adventurous side to them. As they hang by a harness, hanging on with one hand and in the other – a chain saw, removing branch by branch. It is something to watch. But pruning trees is important to keep the rest of the tree alive and keeping trees trimmed is a great way to prevent major damage in a storm. And of course, looking at my alley and thinking about trees reminds me of today's scripture passage.

Now we don't have to look far to see examples or think too deeply to understand why Jesus chose this image for his disciples to focus on. Vineyards were everywhere back then, and it was a very easy image for the disciples to understand. He starts by saying, God is the vine grower. Yes, Jesus is like the vine and the disciples, all of us are like the branches, but the creator of all this is God. And God the vine grower, is the one who created Jesus, the vine, and all of us, the branches who are to produce, good fruit. And God does all this out of love. Love for us, love for all. On the surface this all sounds so simple, but when you reach the part about the bad fruit being thrown into the fire, things get a bit more complicated. Jesus states, “whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.” You don't abide in Me? Well, then, you are thrown away and not just thrown away, thrown into a fiery furnace! Great! This cute image just got really complicated.

So the problem we often have with the Bible is that we think it was only written for us. And while the Bible is a living document which all can relate to, absorb its meaning, learn and grow from its wisdom, we also need to always look at the context, the time in history and the audience it was originally written for and to. This section in the Gospel of John was written for a community which had indeed been thrown away, thrown out. Which makes this verse a bit different. You see, Jesus says these words right before going to the cross. Jesus is about to die and the disciples are about to be cut down, and need to know they will survive, even flourish. They will likely be thrown out of their synagogue, scattered and feel abandoned. But this kind of cut will actually lead to a more abundant life. This was not a condemnation, believe in me or you are doomed, but rather a statement of life, without connection to God, the source of life, abundant life is not possible. So what could have been seen as a word of judgment, can now simply be seen as a word of guidance and hope.

As one pastor writes, you see, some believe that “the cross is some kind of mechanism by which God finds a way to forgive us despite how wretched we are. [But] if the cross means

anything, I think it means that God chose not to sit back in heaven, removed from the pain and [scarcity] of our mortal, free, and difficult life in this world, but rather came in Christ to be joined to it – the ups and downs, the hopes and disappointment, the frailties and faults of our life in this world – so that we would know of God’s unending commitment to us. The cross was not the instrument that made it possible for God to love us, the cross is evidence and testimony to just how much God already loves us and God’s promise to be with us through all things.” (1)

As John’s letter, the Epistle clearly states over and over again, God is love and if we know God, we know love. Period. Love and life are interconnected, woven together in the person of Jesus. This is the force that has changed the world and can still change the world. Even in the early church, the courage they needed came from the assurance that in Christ, God’s kingdom would claim victory over anything they were thrown, especially by a culture that operated by a completely different set of values. Courage through Christ empowers believers to love one another, especially when our differences trigger fearful and suspicious reactions from deep within us and threaten to distance us from one another. And that same door that opens to let out your love to God is the door that opens to let out love for our neighbor, and that includes our brothers and sisters, our entire family, all families, everyone!

So this past week I read a sermon on this passage called “Living a whole hearted life” by Rev. Marsh. I’d like to briefly share with you his perception when looking at this passage and what means for us to be the branches who bear good fruit and the not so good fruit. Okay, I want you to take a minute and think about your daily life and think for a moment about those things you do which leave you exhausted. Not just the boring things, the tedious things, like cleaning a toilet or answering an annoying email, but those things that leave you emotionally drained, those things which leave you physically worn out. Those things that tend to steal your time, take enormous effort to face, and can leave your heart just empty. It may even be a person, a friendship or relationship that has become so one sided, that it too saps the life out of you with each encounter. So, what’s the number one thing on your list that just exhausts you? Number two? Think on that as being a branch of your life.

Now I want you to take a minute and think about your daily life and those things you do which you love. Those things that seem effortless because they bring you so much joy, not little things like a good burger or a funny joke. Those things you become totally immersed in and lose all track of time. Those things you just can’t wait to start again because they fill your day with meaning and purpose. This too could be a person, a friendship or relationship, one that brings you such joy and peace in your life. What is the number one thing on your list that you love? Number two? Three? Four? Five? We need a lot of these branches in our lives.

So the first list are those things that seem to cut us off from our source of life, right? If our entire days were filled with that first list, we would likely not survive, or at least thrive in any good way. The second list are those things which leave us invigorated, alive, filled with the spirit and God’s life force. So what if those two lists were two ways of living? Two ways of living or two branches in each of our lives? What if one branch leaves us dying on the vine, while the other branch helps us bear good fruit?

So while there will always be things on our first list, things we must do, have to do, have to face. What would life be like if we looked at our second list as being more important? Trying to prune or remove some of the things on that first list, maybe even a relationship, if possible and really notice that those things are not bearing good fruit in our lives. And trying to build and concentrate a bit more on the second list which will help us bear good fruit by living a life of more meaning and purpose. (2)

I believe there are times when we need to change or try to get rid of some of the old ways of doing things, the old patterns that weigh us down and suck the life out of us and leave us feeling withered. And concentrate on creating new branches that help us produce fruit, happiness, the kind of life God intends for us. Remember it is God who grows the vine. And like any good vine grower, God tends to the vine with care, pruning where necessary so that it bears as much fruit as possible.

So if Jesus is the vine that shows us the way to be the branches, how do we cultivate more of those good fruits? By knowing the fruits of the spirit Jesus speaks of. You know, the fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23) – It's getting closer to Pentecost and those gifts of the spirit. And when we concentrate on those gifts, those spiritual fruits, our lives can change for the good.

The Rev. Kara Edison, in the book some of us studied during the season of Lent called "A Time to Grow" tells the story of planting blueberry bushes at her home. After carefully planting, fertilizing, watering, and caring for those bushes, she was so excited that they had a few blueberries that first year. That winter she went outside to check on something and stopped dead in her tracks. All of her blueberry bushes were gone, gone! It looked as though they had been chopped down without a trace leftover. Who would do such a thing? Well, after a little research, she learned that rabbits will sometimes eat even the woody parts of blueberry bushes in the winter, if they are hungry enough. Crazy rabbits!

So after devising a plan to protect future bushes from those rabbits, that spring she went out to plant new bushes. As she dug, she ran into a stump that would not come up. She dug around it, and pulled and pulled and it wouldn't budge. So she left it and by the end of the summer, you guessed it, the bush had grown back to the size it had been when first planted and had sent out more and more shoots. (3)

God, the ultimate vine grower, is always present with us, even when we feel our lives have been chopped down, exposed to the root, withered and worthless. Even in our weakness, feeling like we are being pruned at times by life's disappointments and despair, cut down by illness or death, cut down by that first list which drains us. God is always beneath the surface, ready to help us produce new branches as long as we keep that vine, Jesus, close at heart. Recall the words of Jesus – the well of Jacob was insufficient but Jesus, Jesus gives "living water"; the manna of Moses was unfulfilling, but Jesus, Jesus is "the bread of life"; the special candles lit at the Feast of Tabernacles illuminated the city, but Jesus, Jesus is "the light of the world"; as you heard last week, shepherds of Israel cared only for their own comfort but Jesus, Jesus is the "good shepherd" who lays down his life for his sheep. And this image of Jesus being the "true vine" means not only will Jesus not abandon us, but Jesus will cling to us like a vine cling to a tree so that we will not only endure but flourish, flourish, and produce good fruit.

You see this image also describes Jesus' relationship with the church. Jesus is the life-giving vine. To abide conveys Jesus' constant presence among us. Those who abide in Jesus, the vine, are sustained in a relationship of trust, love, and oneness with God. This image is also nonhierarchical – all are rooted together in one vine, entwined with each other in community, all bound to Jesus and each other. It means that once you are part of the vine, part of the church, together we need to use what we have received for a good purpose. To bear good fruit out there.

Think about those two lists in regard to the church. Now, the first list does not mean we should throw out those whom we don't like, those who sap the life out of us and concentrate on the cute children and nice music which fill our Sundays with joy. No. And it's not about the little things we have to do like make a budget, give our offerings, show up. It's about looking around here and together, joining together to focus on those things which bear good fruits of peace, love, joy, kindness, etc. Maybe we need to spend some time thinking on those things, the things that can spread God's love out there and try to stop spending so much time and effort on that focuses too much on fear, like counting numbers, comparing us to other churches, those things that are not life giving, because there is no fear in perfect love.

Bearing fruit means engaging for ourselves as individuals and as the church in those activities and tasks that recognize and invest in the goodness of God's love. All these things are evidence of God's love and that love must be spread. Because like the church, all of life is nothing without belonging, without relationship, without abiding. So think about those lists, those things which bring you life, help you bear good fruit and those things which cut you off and sap the life out of you. Who will you choose to be? Will you be the one who bears the fruit of love, abiding in Jesus and one another, a strong branch on the vine, with God the vine grower, or will you simply be a stick in the mud – lost and alone and burdened by all that cuts you down and leaves you with nothing? Because this, this is the day the Lord has made, not you, not me, God made this day and all we are to do is rejoice and be glad in it. Amen.

- (1) Lose, the Rev. David. "On Being Pruned." John 15:1-8.
- (2) Marsh, The Rev. Michael K. "Wholehearted Life" 5/2/2021.
- (3) Edison, The Rev. Kara. A Time to Grow. p. 57.