

REFLECTION:

Last week we considered the statement of Jesus “I am the Good Shepherd” and today we consider another I am statement I AM THE TRUE VINE. Jesus’ teaching was mostly based on taking familiar scenes and tasks and relating them to God’s relationship with his people. Last week we thought of Jesus being Shepherd and human beings as sheep.

Today we hear Jesus say, “*I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.*” In verse 5, Jesus tells his disciples, (and in telling his disciples, he’s telling us) you are the branches.

Grapevines were a familiar sight in Palestine. The Old Testament, frequently refers to Israel as being a vine that God planted. Psalm 80: 8-9 “*You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land.*” However, in Isaiah (5:1-2): “*. my beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill . . . He expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes*” Hosea said that “*Israel was a luxuriant vine that yields its fruit*” (10:1). Hosea meant that Israel increased in prosperity. But he went on to say that Israel's prosperity unfortunately led to increased idolatry.

Last week we compared human being to sheep and Jesus was the contrast to false shepherds. Today we consider how Jesus is the True Vine and what it means for us to be branches.

Christ is the vine – He is the energy of life, flowing through all things, inspiring all things and energizing all things. Yet, our values and commitments shape the flow of Christ’s flow of energy, expanding or contracting its impact on our lives. When we are connected to the vine we flourish. Disconnected we wither and die spiritually. In order for the branches to be healthy they must remain grafted/connected to the vine. Jesus commands us to “remain in the vine”. The word remain here is the same word used by Luke when the Disciples were on the Road to Emmaus and didn’t recognise Jesus walking with them – they bade Jesus to “stay with them” to abide! The word remain in this instant means long term commitment not a fleeting visit. We are to absorb our nutrients from the vine we are to gain our energy from the sap of the vine.

A common lament, in today's world, is that there simply are not enough hours in the day. Schedules are too full, responsibilities too numerous and commitments too demanding. Given this, a common reason as to why we don't eat better or exercise more or even pray more regularly is simply, "Who has the time?"

We can easily mishear the invitation in today's gospel passage as yet another demand on our time. We can make the mistake of assuming that what often works well in one aspect of our lives, works equally well in our spiritual lives: in this case, the motto of every controlling and rushed person – which is all of us at one time or another – "If I don't do it, it won't get done." But listen to Jesus today, "I AM the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower." And Jesus goes on to tell us very clearly who is doing the work, and it is not you or me, my friends. "He removes every branch in me that does not bear fruit." Just as pruning back the branches of a vine to enable the sap to flow through so too our lives need to be pruned cutting back all that hinders growth in our spiritual lives! We have to intentionally abide in God by prayerfully spending time with God seeking His will. Although the vine is the source of life and energy, the branches are not passive, we must nurture our own fruitfulness and support the fruitfulness of the other branches. The outcome of our abiding in Christ is fruitfulness – the natural outcome of being in relationship with Christ the True Vine – not a forced sense of duty fruitfulness but a natural consequence of the Divine energy flowing through us.

In the letter of 1 John we have this beautiful but challenging description of how our fruit of abiding in Christ is not passive but active in our actions of love.

Yesterday I had the wonderful privilege of conducting a wedding ceremony – it was for a friend of my son and Peter was Best Man. In my message to the Bride and Groom I was emphasizing that their wedding day was just the first step and there would be a lot of effort required to grow their love over the years:

Two of the points I made were that love requires us to forgive one another as God forgives us 1 John 4 ¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for

our sins.” We are all human and make mistakes but God forgives us and just as God forgives us so we must forgive others (I did confess that I too find it difficult to always put that into practice!).

We should not keep a list of wrongs that grow resentment but be forgiving, which enables love to be renewed. Forgive because we are human and we all get things wrong. Life can be busy or difficult. Sometimes you will forget to say thank you to each other; sometimes you will neglect to be kind or to notice the kindness of the other. Choose to forgive because forgiveness opens the door to renewed relationship, to a new dawn. Resentment only traps us in our anger and bitterness.

And secondly:

Invest in your relationship

The introduction to 1 Corinthians 13 reminds us that love is the most precious thing we can know. We can have all wealth and knowledge, but without love, life is without real meaning. With love in our lives we have companionship and friendship; with this we find a more powerful hope, a greater endurance and a stronger resolution to overcome life's challenges. Make time for each other and give opportunity for love to deepen. Work at deepening your concern for each other through sharing your lives. It is in giving ourselves away to each other that we find the deepest meaning and thus happiness in our lives.

And so, back to us today.

Julian of Norwich believed that "love" was the only word that could be used to describe God. God is totally love. We are called to love everyone whose lives we touch. "But God," we moan, "If we are to love everyone, why on earth didn't you make everyone lovable?" And how are we to love if we are called to love those whom we don't even like very much and would prefer not to spend time with?

It's all in how we treat them, how we act in their presence. In this instance, *love* is a verb. Acting in a kind and loving manner may make all the difference in those relationships, even if it doesn't happen overnight.

When we abide in God, we invite God into our lives – however messy that may be. When we abide in God, we are empowered to seek our

place in this world, loving others, living into the mission of the Church, restoring all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.

It is a slow and transformational relationship between the vine grower and the branches. The image of Christ being the True Vine, and we being branches, illustrates our interdependence on Christ and each other. The branches cannot exist of or by themselves – we cannot exist separated from the vine or intertwining branches. As God transforms us, we transform the world.

Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador knew what it meant to be transformed by love; he knew what it meant to be with the people of his country and knew that speaking the truth would likely cause his death; he knew that loving the people of El Salvador meant that his actions and words mattered. He is reported to have said, “If a man knows how to detach from himself and knows how to love, he is a saint; if a man speaks too much about holiness but does not know how to love, he is no saint.” This is how we love.

When we abide in God, God abides in us. God abides in our relationships. God transforms. God will allow us to bear fruit.

I’m going to close with a poem that is printed on the Order of Service:

Vine and Branches

In the vineyard of God his Life flows through the Vine.
Every branch that stays true bears much fruit as a sign
that the branch loves the Vine and the Life he supplies.
As each branch draws its Life, you will be good and wise,
and the Gardener’s praise will reach up to the skies:
The whole world will resound with the Gardener’s repute
as the beautiful vineyard produces its fruit.
So remain true to Jesus; and as your fruit grows,
Then his love and his life will be what the world knows.

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