

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday April 29th, 2018 Easter 5B / Feast of St. Mark
The Rev. Christopher McLaren
Text John 15:1-8
Title: Desiring Growth

Jesus said to his disciples, "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." John 15:1

As a gardener I've always loved this section of scripture from the gospel of John. It is a beautiful metaphor of the spiritual life that all of us can relate to in some way. Jesus was skilled in talking about the spiritual life in ways that everyday people could understand, and perhaps that is why the powerful feared him.

A vine connects the nutrient-rich earth to the branches of the plant that flower and fruit. The vine is the connection, the conduit through which the life flows, producing fruit. In a similar way, Jesus is also the vine, the connection between the divine creator and creation. We are not always aware of this deep and life-giving connection, but it is always there, sometimes beyond our knowing, beyond our perception. The divine-creation connection is always there but is not always in our own consciousness. The text calls Jesus the "true vine," because Jesus is conscious of the divine-creation connection.

It is interesting that the word for **true** in Greek means a lack of forgetfulness. The true vine remembers the connection between "all that is" and the "Source of All That Is." Jesus is true because he remembers the Father; he remembers the life source of all that is; he stays in relationship with the author of life.

One commentator pointed out that the metaphor is not strictly followed, or else the Father would be the dirt. Instead, the language of this mystic gospel is poetic, and it uses language freely to communicate spiritual truth. The Father causes the life and energy to flow into and through Jesus into the world. Remember the beautiful hymn that begins John's Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. John 1

So, the Father is the vine grower whose goal is to produce vintage wine, to concentrate fruit. Thus, like any good gardener or viticulturist, he prunes away dead branches that open the plant up to disease and prunes the productive ones that they might be more productive and healthy.

For reasons that may be pretty obvious to many, I've been thinking a lot about health lately and a what a gift it is, and what it takes to maintain it. This passage is about spiritual health; it is about being connected to the nutrient-rich life of God in Christ. Jesus takes an ordinary agrarian image and uses it to try to teach us something about the spiritual life. While I don't think that the laws governing biological life are the same as those directing the spiritual life, there is much to be discovered in this rich metaphor from Jesus' teaching.

The poet W.H. Auden described the dynamics of the spiritual life in a poem:

If we really want to live,
we'd better start at once to try;
if we don't, it doesn't matter,
but we'd better start to die.

What in the world is Auden getting at here that might help us to understand Jesus' parable of the vine and the branches?

If one wants to have a spiritual life, then there is something required of you. There is, to put it simply, the need of **desire**, "If we really want to live," and **effort**, "we'd better start at once to try." If desire is present and effort is put forth, it is actually possible to make progress, to grow in the spiritual life. However, the opposite is also true: if desire is lacking, biological life, physical life continues but something underneath it is missing. This is what T.S. Elliott called "living" and "partly living" in his Four Quartets.

The spiritual life that gives meaning, dimension and richness to our ordinary biological life atrophies and diminishes if we do not put desire and energy in it. It may be hard to see, but over time, something within the human person is dying; the spiritual life that can give verve and vitality to the biological life is fading, and along with it, the deep potential of the human person who has lost their way.

The picture we are given of God in this teaching parable is important. God is the vine grower who knows how the spiritual life is nurtured. The vine grower cuts away dead wood, dead branches. This is done not out of a lack of compassion or cruelty. Instead the vine grower knows that if the desire and effort are lacking, then the dying process has already begun, and the dead must be trimmed out to save the living. However, on the other hand, if people are trying, and trying is the important word here, then pruning is the perfect action. Spiritual development is just that: development. It happens over time, not all at once. A goal or end may be thought of, but to be truly honest, it is more an adventure than it is a destination. It is a patient, ongoing process in becoming more connected with the divine over time rather than a step-by-step march toward a goal. It is organic and messy, and Episcopalians like that, and sometimes fitful, but the adventure itself is the point as there is always the possibility of more and better fruit, of a fruitful life with God at the center. This is

what directs and guides the vine grower who prunes for vitality and fruit, taking out all that would hinder the thriving of the vine over time.

The whole notion of abiding is a beautiful one in this parable of the vine and the vine grower. "Abide in me as I abide in you." Abiding is not a solo adventure. It is clear from this parable that we are not the first to choose to abide in the vine of Christ. In fact, it is the other way around; Jesus makes the first move. Christ's way of being his Spirit reaches out to us first, so that we might respond and the abiding might be mutual. Because of Christ's reaching out to us, initiating a relationship, we have the real possibility of a mutual life, a shared indwelling.

The parable of the vine and vine grower seems to tell us something of immense importance: in Jesus, God reaches out to us first. Jesus makes the first move. His way of being, his consciousness, offers itself to us. It doesn't replace ours or eliminate it, rather it enlarges our consciousness and raises it to new heights and awareness. It opens a pathway for the love of God to flow into us and fill us with life. When this happens, it changes everything. When Christ dwells within us, we are on the path to transformation, to being changed into Christ's likeness.

I think that this is the point of the whole story: to desire to be connected to God, to work to develop that connection with interest and energy, to open yourself up to the presence of Christ, so that you too may grow up into the full stature of Christ, just as we are promised in baptism. Human discipleship requires our real participation in the endeavor.

What do you think it means to have this desire and to make the effort to grow spiritually? How can you work toward an active and engaged spiritual life that is not an act but an ongoing process that you embrace?

I wonder how are you nurturing your spiritual life. The Spirit has drawn you here this morning, and that is a wonderful first step. For worship is a place of stretching and growth if one is alive to it. Do the words of the hymns, psalms and choir anthems feed your soul? What kind of spiritual reading are you doing? Have you ever read a spiritual classic or searched for something deep to read from the Good Books table? Are you involved in reading *Just Mercy* with the small group and being stretched in your love for humanity and your desire for justice in God's world? Are you being stretched and delighted by the *Passionate Women of the Bible* study where we find examples of the faith that inspire and move us? Have you engaged in a first-time class about tuning up and strengthening your marriage as a spiritual practice and opportunity for your own growth? Have you been learning about how to use the treasure of the Book of Common Prayer to feed your spiritual life on a daily basis?

These are just a few things that are happening here, and I wonder how you are engaging in them. Or perhaps you are teaching children the faith and thus becoming thoughtful about your own? Are you interested in cultivating spiritual friendships where the topic of conversation is really open to where God is at work within you?

Are you alive to where the Spirit might be sending you, like Phillip, who was bidden go down to the road from Jerusalem to Gaza in the heat of the day, where he met a man from the “end of the earth”, an Ethiopian eunuch who was searching for God in the Hebrew scriptures. As a eunuch, the man is not allowed to enter the Temple of the Lord. It is a poignant story of Phillip being stretched by God to open the scriptures to someone different than himself and to welcome one so different into the faith by baptism. Think of how God was stretching Phillip to include into the fold a non-Jew, one from a different race and nationality, one who has not received instruction in the faith, and a eunuch -one who did not fit neatly into his binary gender categories, and who was not poor but of great wealth and privilege. What is to prevent him from being baptized? Everything, according to Phillip’s training and tradition, and nothing, according to the Spirit. I wonder, are we willing to allow the Spirit to send us into new territory, so that the kingdom might grow and expand, including our own hearts and lives and understanding of God’s ever-expanding circle of love and forgiveness? In this Easter season, the story of Acts is that Jesus not only defeats death and escapes the confines of the tomb; Jesus immediately moves into the whole world. Furthermore, the risen Christ enlists and commissions his disciples to move into the whole world in his name. Now nothing can hold back the relentless onward and outward movement of the Holy Spirit. And when we follow this movement of the spirit it means growth for us. It means dependence upon the vine of Christ. It means new fruit. It means being connected to the deep love of God for all that God has made. It means saying you’re included in a new way that leaps over human boundaries with the love of God.

I take great encouragement in this journey into discipleship, into growing in our connection to the vine, from the words of colleague Gordon Cosby who is the founding pastor of Church of the Savior in Washington D.C. and one of the most profoundly Christian men I have ever met. He and his wife have lived and worked in the inner-city of Washington, DC doing extraordinary work in social justice and community building since the end of World War II. He said this recently in an interview:

If one longs for depth in one’s life we must focus on a very few things. There is so little time in one’s brief lifetime. And what is that one thing? We are saying that it is Jesus. I choose to go deep-sea diving in that ocean. Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” Is that true or false? By faith I say that it is true, I give my entire life to that deep exploration. I want to know him in depth and to be transformed into his likeness. It is that likeness, the likeness of Christ that I want to have when I embark on a journey to the Land beyond death. There are infinite depths in Christ to explore. Our task is to be so deeply and intimately connected with Christ as a community that the world will experience the resurrected Christ – the newness God intends – whenever it touches our corporate life.

The Rev. Gordon Cosby – Church of the Savior

I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit - John 1

Note: I wish to thank the commentator John Shea for his notion of desire and effort being part of abiding in the vine and seeking growth which I have used in this sermon liberally.