

Weekend of Sunday, May 2, 2021
Fifth Sunday of Easter/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year B
First Reading: Acts 8:26-40
Second Reading: 1 John 4:7-21
Gospel Reading: John 15:1-8
Sermon Title: “He is the Vine and We are the Branches”

Theme

This Sunday’s image of how the risen Christ shares his life with us is the image of the vine. Christ the vine and we the branches are alive in each other, in the mystery of mutual abiding described in the gospel and the first letter of John. Baptism makes us a part of Christ’s living and life-giving self and makes us alive with Christ’s life. As the vine brings food to the branches, Christ feeds us at his table. We are sent out to bear fruit for the life of the world.

Text

Acts 8:26-40

²⁶An angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a wilderness road.) ²⁷So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” ³⁰So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” ³¹He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. ³²Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.

³³In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.”

³⁴The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” ³⁵Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” ³⁸He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. ³⁹When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

John 15:1-8

[Jesus said:] ¹“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide 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. ⁵I 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. ⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”

Sermon

Winery image

For the last couple of weeks, I have had the opportunity to drive by Mastropietro Winery out near Ellsworth. They don't have miles of vineyards like we find up near Lake Erie, but as an illustration, it still works. In early April, you would have to know that what you are looking at are vineyards because they don't look like much of anything. Just fields with wires stretched across them and these singular dead-looking stalks reaching up to the wires. Smaller vines are extending both directions down the wire from the stalks forming earthy crosses, but in the gray April weather of northeastern Ohio, the smaller vines are hard to see.

Military image

Not being very familiar with the growing of grapes, what strikes me is the absolute barrenness of the field. It occurred to me that the scene looked like one of the military cemeteries I have seen pictures of – the ones where all you can see are acres and acres of white stone crosses in rows. I knew that what I was looking at was a vineyard, but there were no signs of life. No lush green leaves, no fat clusters of grapes, just acres, and acres of stretched wires and lifeless crosses of grapevines. I don't know but I suspect that after the harvest season is over the vines are pruned back by the vineyard workers. The purpose of a grapevine is, after all, to produce grapes not lengthy vines.

Pruned apple tree image

In the community where I grew up, there was an apple orchard. And every winter the orchard workers would prune the trees, removing all the upward reaching branches so that all the branches were reaching out and down. Apple trees left unpruned to grow on their own, will reach upward like any other tree. This makes it difficult to harvest the apples. But just as the purpose of the grapevine is to produce grapes not more vines, so the apple tree's purpose is to produce apples not more branches. Fruit growers know that their trees or vines as the case may be, are their single biggest investment and so time spent pruning them for optimal production simply makes good business sense.

Last week we heard Jesus talking about being the good shepherd. And this week we hear him talking about vineyard work, even calling himself a vine. The idea of using a vine and vineyard, vine grower, and pruning is not unique to Jesus in scripture. These same images can be found in many places in the OT. The reason they are used so often is that they work so well. Many people in Jesus' day made their living off of the land and so these metaphors worked for the audience he was talking to.

¹Jesus said, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower."

God the Father lays claim to the vine, God's Son Jesus. God planted him here on earth, metaphorically speaking, and expects a yield from the investment. But, as all the vine-growers in Jesus' audience know, there is more to it than simply planting the vine. There is watering and fertilizing and pruning because remember, the purpose of a grapevine is to produce grapes, not branches. Jesus went on:

²He [Jesus' Father] removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.

You see God knows what is going on. God has been pruning the branches off of his Son, the vine. Later Jesus will say that *we* are the branches. And so already this is beginning to get a little uncomfortable.

Now I am sure you have heard sermons on this text preached where the exhortation made was that God would prune sin from our lives so that we will be better able to produce a harvest. I have probably preached that sermon myself. And while that is a valid direction to go, that is not what Jesus said. He wasn't talking about pruning the little leaves and vines off of the branches – he was talking about pruning branches. In other words, in this passage, Jesus is not talking about pruning sinfulness from a member of the body, he's talking about pruning the member right off the vine which is himself –in other words, removing members of the body from the body of Christ. For the sake of the body of Christ, some members may have to be removed.

I hope alarms are going off for you because they are for me. When I read this text this week, I was reading it as if I had never read it before. I read it again and again. And then I sat back and said to myself, this is some serious stuff. God is serious

about building up his kingdom and that is why we are called to be a part of his work. Remember the covenant God made with the Israelites right after they were freed from their Egyptian slavery – the Mosaic Covenant? It was simply this: “I will be your God and you will be my people.” This is the same kind of deal. We have been called to be a part of the body of Christ. If we have accepted that then we had better act like it. We had better produce or we could be removed from it!

Going back to Jesus’ use of the vine and branch metaphor, the purpose of the church is to produce members. If all it produces is bureaucracy – a building, a council, committees, meetings, and the like then we are at risk of being cut off, thrown into the fire, and burned.

Jesus warned those listening to him that day that his disciples, his true disciples will abide in him. Abide means “to wait patiently for” and “to accept the consequences of” something. To abide in Jesus, therefore, means to accept the consequences of our making him Lord over our lives, which means patiently seeking his will and not our own.

Raisin’ the Bar Challenge

As always, we, each of us individually, and we, corporately as a body, need to devote ourselves to both; prayer – a time when we can take our concerns to God. And to meditation – a time when we provide space and time for God to talk with us. That is what it means to “abide” in the Lord. And for the disciple, there is no other option. The true disciple is either working cooperatively to be a part of the body in accomplishing God’s will, or he or she will be pruned. Cut off from the vine, gathered and thrown into the fire and burned.

This is a hard teaching from Jesus today. But as we consider our mission as one small part of God’s preeminent mission to save the world, we all need to recognize that the Lord makes no provision for personal opinions and disobedience - even partial obedience is still disobedience.

But, as there always is, there is an upside to this teaching, and it is found in the last two verses of this passage:

⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

When we are obedient and seeking God's will as part of and cooperating within the body of Christ, the church, we have access to the very power of God. And when we take advantage of the very power of God we can bear much fruit and that glorifies God. And what more could any human being want to be read in their defense, standing before the seat of judgment?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, we know you love us because you went to the cross for us. We also know that apart from you we are nothing. Send your Spirit to remind us that you are the vine and we are the branches and that our God-given mission is to produce good fruit. Amen