

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Easter
May 2, 2021 Year B
St. Michael's Episcopal Church
The Reverend Canon Michael J. Horvath
Gospel: John 15:1-8

Throughout his life, Jesus describes himself as various things – the bread of life, the way, the truth, and last week the Shepherd. And today, we get a much more agrarian description of Jesus. “I am the vine, you are the branches.” It is sometimes easy for us to see Jesus as simply an example of how to live life, a person in whose steps we want to follow. But it is a different thing to understand our source of being, our lives, as being rooted deeply in the Jesus's being. Here Jesus is asking us to know him as our source, the very essence of Jesus being our very essence. The person without whom we do not exist. Try that on for a while.

This is Christ dwelling in us and us in Christ. This is part and parcel of the ultimate truth of Jesus's death and resurrection, the epilogue, if you will, of Easter Sunday - the Son of God taking on our life so that we can have a share in God's life. Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, says this perfectly - “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” Our participation in divine life is what Jesus is describes when he says, “I am the Bread of Life. Unless you eat my body and drink my blood you have no life in you.” Our relationship with Jesus is alive, it is continually growing, or it is dying. We are not simply following a wise teacher like Buddha or Confucius, or Oprah. We are called to be living Christs. That's the call of our faith. “I am the vine and you are the branches.”

But with the vine and the branches, there's a third actor: the vinegrower, God the Father who works the vineyard. “He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.” A surprising truth about gardening is how much cutting away needs to be done. Not just cutting away dead branches or deadheading flowers. Sometimes, new green growth needs cutting back, too. Things can get overgrown such that some plants don't produce what they were meant to produce, such as blossoms or fruit. Too much green is not always a good thing.

It's the same for grape vines. Vineyard workers are constantly pruning vines so that the vines can focus their energy to their real purpose of bearing fruit. And we are talking about quality, over quantity. A pruned vine may not produce as many grapes but you will get much sweeter, more intensely flavored grapes. And vines are pruned differently for the type of grape, for the location, for the soil, etc. And certain years they are pruned back to just a twig with a single bud, almost dead to our eyes. But all this is done with a long view in mind. Skilled vineyard workers don't just prune branches for the current year. They are always looking at what will make the vines fruitful years down the road. “He removes every branch in me that bear no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.”

This is true of our lives in God, if we think about it. God the Father, the Divine Vineyard Worker, is always working for our good, making sure we don't get in our own way, encouraging

us to be fruitful as an expression of His love. Jesus says to the disciples in today's gospel. "You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you." Same thing – we are cleansed, we are pruned by the words Jesus has spoken. We need the Divine Vineyard Worker for our life. Our participation in Christ as branch to a vine includes God pruning away the things that get in the way of our fruitfulness in love and to the praise of God.

Looking at the lives of Jesus's disciples, up to his point in the gospel, we see that they have been pruned in sometimes loving ways and in drastic ways.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus has called them to take up their cross and follow, to live a life that bears the fruit of God's kingdom. When James and John come to Jesus looking for places of power on his right and left, he reminds them that self-giving service is the fruit of the Kingdom; just then their misguided, misdirected ambition is pruned away. When Peter asks how often he should forgive, "As many as seven times," Jesus tells him forgiveness needs to be limitless; Peter has been pruned of his desire to be grudgingly forgiving.

Through the waters of baptism we are grafted as branches into Jesus Christ the vine, and we are pruned according to his words. "You shall not bear false witness," prunes back our temptation to gossip and murmur. In other words, "Let your speech be always gracious." Today's second reading from First John, prunes back at the idea that we can somehow love God without acting in loving ways to the people God is nurturing in our midst. "Those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen cannot love God whom they have not seen...those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also." When Jesus says, "Whoever takes your coat, give them your shirt also" he uproots greed in us and redirects our energy to be compassionate and generous in the sharing of our possessions.

I have, or rather had, a large geranium that I have loved these last few years. It has these magnificent pale pink blossoms that have a tinge of black at the center. I noticed that the bigger it grew, the fewer flowers were blooming. I knew that as much as I loved it as it was, it would be even better, healthier, and bloom more if I cut it back. So that's what I did, I pruned it back hard. Similarly, God loves us as we are but won't leave us where we are. God is continually pruning us, shaping us, so that the life of Christ grows in us and bears fruit in love and praise of God. Out of love for us, the Divine Vineyard Worker prunes for our conditions— who we are, what stage of life we're at—carefully trimming away all that keeps us from our God-given purpose. And when our faith falls dormant and lifeless as a twig and a single bud, the long view is always in mind: our participation in the life of Christ will soon bring us into bloom.

"Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches." Since abiding in Jesus means life for us, it really is the easiest thing in the world. It means being where Jesus has promised to be present. In prayer, we abide in Jesus. In the community of the faithful, here in the gathering of the church, we abide in Jesus because where two or three are gathered in his name he promises to be with us. We abide in Jesus in the world when we engage in works of mercy for the hungry, sick, poor, or those pushed to the edges of society because he is present

in them. And here at the altar, we abide in the body of Jesus, in bread and wine, so that we can have a share in his life, the life of Christ in us and our lives bearing fruit in love to the praise of God. Amen.