

Sermon
Fifth Sunday of Easter
Sunday, April 28th, 2024
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Reverend Victoria Scott

Readings: [ACTS 8:26-40](#); [PSALM 22:24-30](#); [1 JOHN 4:7-21](#); [JOHN 15:1-8](#)

Several weeks ago, I referred in my sermon to a classic Buddhist teaching. The Buddha tells his disciples that understanding his teachings is like picking up a poisonous snake in the wild: it's easy to get bitten. It is easy to misinterpret his teaching to mean the opposite of what he actually intends – not off by a few degrees, but 180 degrees, and the reverse of what he means. If you pick up a snake in the middle of its body, it can turn and bite, but if you find a forked stick and pick up a snake just behind its jaws, you'll be safe and sound. The Buddha says it's not simply a matter of hearing the teaching or being able to recite it; it's about holding the teaching the right way.

This is particularly resonant as we find ourselves deep in the poetic language and imagery of the Gospel of John. If we pick up the metaphor today's Gospel passage offer us, of vine and branches, without looking at the broader context of Jesus's words, we might interpret it as saying "If you want to live, you'd better stay connected to me – or else." We might find ourselves feeling nervous, fearful even. Wondering how withered we are. Thinking that we'd better find a way to stay connected or we'll be the ones burning on the brush pile...

Looking at where we are in the Gospel of John – chapter 15 – gives us the context we need to hold this metaphor the right way. This metaphor of vine and branches is offered in the middle of the so-called Farewell Discourse. Jesus has told the disciples that he is leaving, and not only is he leaving, he'll be humiliated and suffer. This had to have been disorienting, bewildering, frightening for the disciples. They have followed, and pinned their hopes on Jesus, and things are heading in an unexpected direction! Thomas's question in chapter 14 shows us this as he asks "How can we know the way?" Jesus's words are not a lecture on salvation or discipleship; the context of this metaphor of vine and branches is crisis. Jesus is offering pastoral care, assuring the disciples that his departure is not abandonment, but a shift that makes way for a deeper relationship, and a greater closeness.

The image of the vine and branches is offered to soothe and bring solace. Jesus is saying that the connection with the disciples – and with us! – will be so organic and fundamental that separation is virtually unthinkable. Think about it: a vine is all branches! Unlike a tree or shrub with a larger trunk, the vine is its branches. Branches and vines aren't identical, of course, but they do share a common life. You cannot have one without the other, and to destroy a branch is to diminish the vine to a certain extent. The vine needs its branches to bear fruit. Vine and branches represent a mutually beneficial relationship.

Last week I pointed out that the Resurrection stories of the first three weeks of Eastertide had shifted to stories of Jesus's teaching about living, and about the way to relationship with God, and with each other. The living word for us in this vine and branches metaphor is about life in relationship, with and for God, and with and for each other.

What does a life abiding in Jesus as he abides in us look like? How does that shape our lives? It looks like intersecting, intertwining branches. It looks like a radical connectedness and closeness in all of life. It shapes our lives by highlighting the interdependence between God, and all people and all of creation.

The readings that surround our Gospel also point us to connectedness and interdependence. This morning's passage from Acts shows us that the gospel reaches out to those who are excluded, those who are at the margins of community. The Ethiopian eunuch asks, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" Well, quite a bit, actually! The Ethiopian eunuch, while a prestigious figure in a foreign royal court would have been regarded as an outsider. His status as a eunuch would traditionally have meant that he could not become a Jew. Philip's engagement with him, and his response represents the expanding inclusion of the good news of God's salvation at the time. Philip listens to the Ethiopian eunuch and responds accordingly. This is our call, too. To reach out, to listen to each other and to respond. To care for and nurture each other so that we might all flourish. For us, this story represents the call of the God's good news to dismantle barriers, and to recognize that we are all connected.

The passage we heard from 1 John confirms and affirms that we are God's beloved. We *can* love, because God loves us. Our capacity and ability to love is already there, but we have to be willing to let that love overflow from us to others and into our world. God wants us to make that love known - to make that love visible and tangible. God wants us to let that love intersect and intertwine to make this world be a buzzing, blooming, fruitful garden.

Too often, the message in our Christian faith has been about fear. The impetus for relationship with God has been fear-based: as I mentioned at the beginning, we think "I'd better stay connected to the vine", afraid that if we don't, we'll end up in the brush pile. We can't see and be God's love in the world from a place of negativity. God – the Source of Life, the Creator – is love. Jesus draws us into a radically connected, person-to-person relationship with God – and with all of creation – that is rooted in a broad, expansive, all-encompassing LOVE. Remember that. Sink the roots of your soul down into that in our worship this morning.

God's existence doesn't depend on our fruitfulness, but our bearing fruit enhances God's life and mission in the world. This imagery and metaphor invite us to reflect on what we might call "spiritual horticulture". Left to themselves, vines grow like weeds. Part of cultivating the vines is to prune their branches and tie them onto wires. Spiritual practices, our liturgy and worship, serve as those wires, holding us, supporting us so that we can grow and flourish and bear fruit.

Here on a Sunday morning, we can be active in that spiritual horticulture. We can think about how we might clear away what is inessential or harmful to us. And we can remind ourselves of the intimate connection between the vine and all its branches – the intimate connection between God and humanity and all of creation. We can think about ways that we might tend our branches and all the other branches to grow God’s love and vision in this world.

The image of vine and branches is an invitation to see that there is no such thing as individualism. We depend on God and on each other, and our Christian faith celebrates this. Abiding in Jesus, as he abides in us is about living into that dependence. It is about recognizing and embracing and tending to the connections between all people and all things.

I’ll close with a prayer, by John Phillip Newell:

For everything that emerges from the earth
thanks be to you, O God,
Holy Root of being
Sacred Sap that rises
Full-bodied Fragrance of earth’s unfolding form.
May we know that we are of You
may we know that we are in You
may we know that we are one with You
together one.
Guide us as nations to what is deepest
open us as peoples to what is first
lead us as a world to what is dearest
that we may know the holiness of wholeness
that we may learn the strength of humility
that together we may live close to the earth
and grow in grounded glory.

In Jesus name. Amen.