



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

Fifth Sunday of Easter – May 2, 2021

Scripture Passages: 1 John 4:7-21, John 15:1-8

+I speak to you in the name of God: Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer.

Vines and branches. Well that's a familiar image for those of us in Niagara – particularly on the peninsula – in wine country. I've driven past the beautiful fields of neatly cultivated vines nestled up against the escarpment for much of my life. And of course, I have appreciated the wine that has been produced from those vines.

And in this part of the Gospel of St. John, Jesus is talking about the life of those vines and branches and how they relate to each other. And about who takes care of them. How they're connected and sustained. And, what their purpose is.

It's all an extended metaphor of course: a metaphor that tells us what Jesus' life, and purpose is – and by extension how our life and purpose are shaped too.

And it's interesting because it all starts with pruning, . . .

Our garden is abloom this year in a way that I haven't seen before. It's been a long, cool Spring and that's obviously what the plants and shrubs and trees like. They're blooming their heads off. Of course, last Fall, my husband who is a talented – and rather fearless gardener like his mother before him - while putting the garden to bed for the winter, gave everything a good prune.

It seemed to me at the time to be a rather severe cutting back but the results are there to be seen. The sweet Almond has never bloomed like it – beautiful pink snowball flowers in profusion – the forsythia a blaze of yellow and the Weigelia is about to explode into fuschia-coloured glory. I am very much put in mind of Mark chapter 6 which of course is in the poetry of the King James Version in my head when Jesus says:

“Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.”

So, the pruning was necessary for the growth and beauty to occur. As my husband will tell you - gardeners prune to increase new growth, to renew vigor and strength and to control old growth. It's a very important part of gardening. Things are just not healthy nor do they grow to their potential without it. So it's interesting when Jesus says:

“I am the Real Vine and my Father is the Farmer. He cuts off every branch of me that doesn't bear grapes. And every branch that is grape-bearing he prunes back so it will bear even more. You are already pruned back by the message I have spoken.”

Every good thing that is produced by Jesus: in his teaching, in his loving, in his healing, in his dying for us – is passed on to us – the branches. The vine which has been pruned for this purpose (Jesus) feeds the branches, sustains the branches, is the energy, sustenance and support for us, the branches.

So what Jesus is trying to describe both for the eyes and for the mind and heart with this image is this sort of symbiotic relationship that we – who have become his followers with our lives – are in.

But I'd like to zero in on other words he uses to describe this relationship - he says: abide in me as I abide in you. It's worth noticing that Jesus doesn't just give a command: abide in me. No, yet again he's talking about a relationship – you live in me and I'll live in you and together we'll offer God's love to the world.

And as one scholar says, the reciprocal way Jesus speaks “changes everything. The other statements about pruning and withering and the rest are not threats of intimidation but rather statements of fact, descriptions of what happens when we do not abide in Jesus, when we are separated from his love and acceptance, we run or hide or think we can do it on our own or decide to stand alone or whatever. Branches don't do that well when separated from the vine. At best they, like cut flowers, have a burst of color and bloom but then fade and wither.”

Okay, so that's a lot to consider there. This “abiding” – well, it's like connecting a circuit; connecting a flow of energy which then gives purpose and life.

And as another scholar writes,

“When Jesus says, “I have come that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete,” he is trying to connect his joy with the joy that is already in us; to awaken our joy; to heal our joy; to give our joy new hope, a wider horizon, and a deeper grounding.

[So] when we love one another as Jesus loves us, we first learn from Jesus what love is. And having experienced being loved by Jesus – had that love heal, restore and renew the loving that was already in us – we then love others the same way.”

That’s pretty connected. And I can imagine that these must have been very comforting words to Jesus’ followers. And don’t forget, historically speaking, Jesus says all these things about loving and abiding and pruning and withering as he’s on his way to the cross. And remember we’re reading these words almost like a retrospective – as his followers, the early church, must have too - in the light of the resurrection – in a kind of “What did Jesus say again?” How are we supposed to live again? kind of way.

I’m sure they asked that question in a kind of way that is searching for guidance and light in a dark time. Kind of like how we are right now too – in the midst of a time of profound uncertainty, in the midst of the confusion of a pandemic when we’re all wondering how to help, how to live safely, justly, and generously. Just like that.

And so the questions that I’m asking this morning are these: If as believers, we enjoy that kind of connected relationship with God, then what does it mean to be a branch on Jesus’ vine right now?

If we took this description of our relationship with Jesus seriously, how might that shape our actions in this time? If we took this deeply connected relationship seriously, I think we should be asking – in all seriousness – WWJD? as we move forward. What must the church look like now? What must the shape of her ministry be coming through and out of this pandemic?

Important words to consider as we remind ourselves that God is what love is. And that Jesus came to show us what God’s love is like – not just so that we could experience it but that we could offer it to others as a gift too.

“Abide in me, as I abide in you... these words are pure promise, gracious words of presence and providence. Words that need to be shared, whether shouted from the rooftops or whispered in a moment of tender and vulnerable stillness. “Abide in me, as I abide in you.”

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.