

King of Glory Lutheran Church
May 1/2, 2021
Year B: 5th Sunday of Easter: John 15:1-8
Rev. Debra Abbott

John 15:1-8

“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.”

Jesus said, “I am the true vine...” Well, I wonder what you think about when you hear these words. If we all had paper and pens or canvases and paintbrushes I would ask you to draw or paint the vine and the fruit and the vinegrower that Jesus describes.

I’ll tell you what I picture when I hear Jesus’ words. I grew up in the San Joaquin Valley of California. Even if you’ve never heard of it it’s possible that you have eaten fruit or nuts or some other produce from this valley. It has rich farmland and conditions that produce a wide variety of crops.

One of the biggest crops this valley produces are raisins. If you’ve ever eaten SunMaid raisins in the red container with the woman on the front, those are from the San Joaquin Valley. There are vineyards throughout the valley where grapes are grown and then harvested to dry in the sun until they become raisins.

My grandfather, my mom’s dad, was a raisin farmer. Many of my childhood memories are from this farm where my sister and I would run through the vineyards in the hot sun or pick vegetables from my grandmother’s garden or crack walnuts open from the huge walnut tree by the house.

I share this with you because when I hear Jesus say that he is the vine a very clear picture comes to my mind. I picture what a vine looks like, how strong it is, how it is tangled and woven together going on and on and on and is covered in bunches of grapes. And I know that the vine needs sun and water to grow and a farmer to keep watch over it and prune and harvest it to get the best crop.

Today, as we hear our gospel reading, I have to think that Jesus had this picture in his mind as well. Jesus knew something about vineyards. I love that. I love that Jesus knew something that we can still see and touch and experience today.

Now even if you have never seen or walked through a vineyard before I know that you can imagine *something* that grows and produces fruit. A peach tree. A raspberry bush. A watermelon vine. We all have seen or had some experience of fruit on a tree or bush or plant.

So you and I know that fruit doesn't just appear on it's own. It needs the vine. It needs a source of strength and nourishment in order to grow.

Jesus uses this image for us today to help us understand who we are and how we grow and thrive and are connected. You and I, we need the vine. We come from the vine. We are connected and we are a part of each other.

So Jesus uses this image of the vine and then says, "Abide 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."

And from 1 John 4:16, "So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."

One of my favorite words is this word "abide." It speaks to our hearts. We are inseparable from God. God lives in us and we live in God.

The Message, a contemporary translation of the Bible, offers John 15:4 this way, Jesus said, "Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you. In the same way that a branch can't bear grapes by itself but only by being joined to the vine, you can't bear fruit unless you are joined with me."

Abide in me, live in me, make your home in me, be joined with me. These are Jesus' words to his disciples and us today.

Jesus speaks these words to his disciples before he is arrested and taken away to be crucified. And in this moment Jesus speaks of being joined with his disciples. He is preparing them for what is to come because things are going to change. Jesus is not going to be with his disciples in the way that they have been used to. But even as he begins to say goodbye, Jesus promises to be with them always.

In this moment the disciples don't know what is going to happen next. And in the midst of what feels like the loss of a loved teacher and friend, Jesus assures them of the continued relationship they will have with him, even beyond the cross. A relationship nurtured and tended by God in love.

I know that Jesus is speaking to us today just as he spoke to his disciples. Drawing us a picture of the way we are connected in love.

Because we all have days when we don't feel connected to God at all. We wonder if we've been pruned away or if we will ever produce fruit that will please God.

And we have all felt disconnected from someone important at some point in our lives. In this past year that has been true on a worldwide level. Many of us have felt cut off from people and communities and places that gave us support and life.

So we stand with the disciples, wondering what to do when things change, wondering how we will stay connected to God and to one another, wondering how to produce good fruit.

Jesus words are meant for us today. "Abide 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."

Jesus is reminding us of who we are and what our purpose is. We don't exist apart from God. God created us, God tends us, and by God's love we bear the fruits of the Holy Spirit. Just as branches are connected to vines and roots so are we connected to God and to one another.

This is not only a beautiful image of us as individuals connected to God but of our community in Christ, the church. The vine and branches and fruit might look a little wild and tangled in the field but they are beautiful, life-giving and capable of a great harvest.

This week I was reminded of the gift of the church, the whole church, as our

Rocky Mountain Synod in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America held our annual synod assembly. Every year all of the ELCA congregations in Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, New Mexico and El Paso, Texas gather together to learn and reflect and pray and work together as the church.

This year, like last year, we gathered together virtually by zoom. We worshiped together and learned about the many ministries going on in this synod and in our national and global church. This church we are a part of is a living body. And together we care for our neighbors, grow in faith and share the gospel.

Our keynote speaker was Dr. Edward Antonio, Chief Diversity Officer and Professor of Humanities at Concordia College in Minnesota. He encouraged us to share our stories and listen to stories of people who have identities different from our own. He asked us to name people who we think of as “other,” people we think of as different from ourselves, people who make us uncomfortable, people we are afraid of. That might be because of race, class, religion, age or any other identity you might name.

Dr. Antonio commended to us the practice of getting to know each other, to share our stories, to be vulnerable and to see the humanity of one another. In this way we can begin to break out of all the ways we hurt each other through racism especially, which was our focus in this assembly, and in all the other ways we find to separate ourselves and keep distance from the other.

If we ever had an opportunity as individuals or as a church to share stories and get to know one another this is it. This is the time. We are moving into days and weeks and months where we will begin to come together again. In worship, in education, in service, in fellowship. God is giving us an incredible opportunity to get to know each other again or for the first time.

How will we come together again as the church and as individuals? Because we have been changed. To use Jesus’ image we have been pruned and we have grown during this past year. So how will we continue the ministry of Jesus? What fruit will God produce from us? How will we discover ways that we are connected with people we don’t know in our own community? How will we share our stories and listen for God’s call?

Jesus said, “I am the true vine” and we are the branches. We are grounded and connected in Jesus and in love. Together God gives us all we need to produce good fruit. There are exciting and life-giving days ahead. Amen.