

May 2, 2021

*"I Am the True Vine"*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

John 15:1-8

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As I was preparing my sermon on today's lectionary reading, I was reminded of a story about Pastor Fred Craddock. He had been asked to preach at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, where both Martin Luther King, Sr. and Martin Luther King, Jr. had served as pastors. At that time, however, Joe Roberts was the pastor and he had invited Craddock to speak. Well, the time comes for Craddock to preach and he moves up to the pulpit. Now to give you a visual, Ebenezer is a big church, and Craddock was a rather diminutive man, standing just over 5 feet tall, and maybe 150 pounds soaking wet, and he was a white man in the midst of this all-black congregation. Have any of you ever gone to an all-black church? John and I have, in New Orleans and Miami. And let me tell you, it was fabulous. The music, the preaching. The Spirit was everywhere! But getting back to Craddock – just as he's about to speak, Pastor Roberts interrupts him by suddenly getting up and he begins to sing... "I'm gonna sing when the Spirit say sing, I'm gonna sing when the Spirit says sing." And then he goes on, "I'm gonna pray when the Spirit say pray." And all the associates joined in to sing, and the musicians went to their instruments, the piano and the organ and the drums and the electric guitar and the people all started singing. Craddock's standing there, taken by surprise and just waiting. Suddenly, he realizes that he's the one upfront, supposedly leading, so he also then begins singing and clapping his hands, getting into the Spirit. And pretty soon the whole congregation is standing, clapping, swinging and singing, and Craddock says it was just fabulous. But then just as suddenly as it started, Pastor Roberts puts out his hand and quiets and sits everybody down so that Craddock can begin preaching. After the service was over Craddock said to Roberts, "You didn't tell me you were going to do that, and it kind of shocked me a little bit." Roberts responded, "Well, I didn't plan to." "Then why did you?" asked Craddock. Roberts said, "Well, when you got up, and we all saw you standing there, looking way out of place, one of the associates leaned over to me and said, "This boy's gonna need a lot of help today." This boy's gonna need a lot of help.

And, in a sense, that's the way I feel today. That this girl's gonna need a lot of help from the Holy Spirit. Because our scripture message today is one of those more difficult ones to hear. Now Jesus starts off by telling us, "I am the true vine..." This initially sounds so nice, connected to Jesus so that we might bear good fruit. But then comes the more stinging message about pruning and being thrown into the fire. This of course refers to the final judgment. And who wants to hear about that. So I'm going to trust that the Holy Spirit will lead us all to open our hearts and minds to what Jesus is teaching us.

So first, let's talk about the allegory that Jesus presents us. In the Bible, after people, vines, vineyards and trees are the most often mentioned objects. And, for the purpose of illustration, I'm going to use vines and trees interchangeably since they are so similar. They both get their nourishment from the earth that God created, they both have branches coming off a core, and they both produce – leaves, blossoms, fruit. The main difference is that vines need support, trees don't. So, let's first consider trees. They are mentioned in the very first chapter of the very first book of the Bible, Genesis. It describes, "Trees of every kind bearing fruit." And a tree is also mentioned in the very last chapter of the very last book of the Bible, Revelation, where it talks about "The tree of life, bearing fruit." The first named tree in the Bible is the fig tree, fortunately for Adam and Eve, having leaves large enough to hide their nakedness. And let's not forget the olive tree leaf that the dove brought back to Noah, signifying new life and a new beginning. Or the sycamore tree Zacchaeus climbed up into to see the Jesus. Or the mustard tree that Jesus used in one of his wonderful parables. And then there's palm trees, from which their branches were used to commemorate Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. And, of course, vineyards are mentioned everywhere in the Bible, in fact the grapevine is the most mentioned planting in the Bible. Yes, biblical trees and vines have depicted blessing, cover, hope, nourishment, beauty, strength and triumph. And, let's not ever forget that one lifeless tree... the one used to crucify our Lord.

Before we move on, there's a wonderful poem about trees some of you may know by Joyce Kilmer that I want to share with you. It goes like this. *I think that I shall never see, a poem as lovely as a tree. A tree whose hungry mouth is pressed, against the Earth's sweet flowing breast. A tree that looks at God all day, and lifts her leafy arms to pray. A tree that may in summer wear a nest of robins in her hair. Poems are made by fools like me, but only God can make a tree.*

Yes, only God indeed! But now let's get back to our scripture. This passage is in the portion of the Gospel of John that is known as Jesus' "farewell discourse," his final speech given to his disciples after they ate the Last Supper. In a nutshell, Jesus first tells his disciples that he will be going away, but he will send the Holy Spirit to guide them and be with them. He then bestows his peace on the disciples, telling them not to be troubled by the things of this world. Then he tells them they are to love one another. He says, "By this, others will know you are my disciples, that you love one another." And here also Jesus gives his final, "I Am" statement, making the comparison of Jesus as a vine, and his disciples, and today that includes you and me, as the branches that are to bear good fruit. Jesus starts by saying, "I am the true vine, and my Father, God, is the vine grower, the gardener." And then he immediately hits us with that hard part. That God will cut off every branch that does not bear fruit and

throw it into the fire. And the branches that do bear fruit, he will prune. Now our human nature is such that I'm guessing we don't like either of these options. We certainly don't want to be thrown into the fire at the final judgment, and somehow being pruned feels like we worship a God that's out to punish us. But let's look a little closer at what Jesus may be saying.

As all you gardeners out there know, we plant for a purpose. That being to grow crops, or flowers, or fruit of some kind. Now if our gardens did not produce anything – refused to grow for one reason or another, how many of us would even go through the trouble of planting in the first place? None of us! But we do! Because with the proper care and attention, the purpose of our planting is fulfilled – creating beauty, or growing things for our nourishment. And good gardeners love and care for their plants. They make sure they have the right amount of sun and water and air. They cultivate the soil and fertilize. All things to sustain the plants and help them flourish and thrive. And another thing they do... they prune for the benefit of the plants. They cut away dead sections, they trim back unproductive branches that take strength from the rest of the plant, they shape it by clipping it in just the right places. They prune the plant because it enables the plant to grow better and produce more fruit. And because of all this care and attention, there's a special connection that develops between the gardener and his or hers plantings. Some of you have felt that connection. Having something live and grow because of the care and love you give it.

And so it is with God. Just like an earthy gardener, God wants us to grow and flourish and produce fruit, for this is the purpose in which we were created. And so, doesn't it follow that we too need a little pruning in parts of our lives? Perhaps the admonitions we heard today are a good reminder for us to reflect on our lives. Because God's pruning is really only a matter of cutting away those things that obstruct or hinder our ability to bear fruit. Perhaps God needs to cut away at our pride or arrogance, so that we might instead be more humble. Perhaps he needs to trim back our propensity to so easily become impatient or angry, and so we can instead show more kindness and gentleness. Perhaps he needs to prune away our self-centered attitude, so that we can instead be more giving, more compassionate. Perhaps he needs to snip off our tendency to judge others, instead making us more tolerant and understanding. You see, God's whole purpose is for us to bear fruit for his kingdom. And he helps us, not only by loving us, caring for us, and nurturing us, but also by pruning us. To enable us to bear more good fruit. Because, at the end of this life, don't we all want to say that we have lived fruitful and meaningful lives? And if we do, there's one thing that is certain. We will never have to worry about the downside of that final judgment. It becomes a moot point.

Today we celebrate Holy Communion when we take into our bodies the grain also grown by the Master Gardener – the Bread of Life, and we drink of the fruit of the True Vine – Jesus Christ our Lord. It is a meal of nourishment - of forgiveness, of grace, of love. Did you notice that eight times in this short passage, Jesus says either “Abide in me,” or “I abide in you.” And the word “abide,” conveys a personal, intimate relationship, a mutual indwelling with one another – like that special connection I mentioned earlier. Yes, God wants to make our lives beautiful, fruitful, meaningful. But he can only do that when we let him prune away what is broken and fruitless in our lives. So let us draw close to the One who is the True Vine, the Tree of Life.

Yes, sermons are made by fools like me, but only God can make a tree. Amen