

Branches on the Vine

Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year B – John 15:1-8

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, May 6, 2012

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

I suppose if I had grown up in the Napa Valley of California, or the wine country of western New York, or on the fertile slopes of the Kidron Valley where Jesus was walking with his disciples in this morning's gospel lesson, I might be able to relate better to the fruitfulness of the grape vines that Jesus used in his object lesson this morning.

But I *do* remember the year we moved back to Ohio, when my dad planted what turned out to be the *mother* of all cucumber plots. Now, you've got to understand, my Daddy *really* liked pickles. Mom had one of the certifiably best recipes around for the bread-and-butter pickles that Dad so craved, but for years, living in suburban Phoenix, he had had to be content with a few jars a year made up from cucumbers from other people's gardens – or, worse yet, from *store-bought* cucumbers. When we moved to Ohio for my seventh-grade year, and lived on an old farmstead, Dad saw his big chance. Borrowing our landlord's tractor, Daddy plowed a garden of about an acre and a half, and along the east side of that garden, he formed a long, raised berm. He selected the best seeds, and planted each one at its proper spacing and depth. He fertilized and watered the plants. He worked the soil carefully week-by-week to prevent weeds getting hold. The growing conditions that season were good – just the right amount of rain and sunshine, and soon broad green leaves appeared on the vines, followed in due course by giant blossoms. Those vines looked *magnificent*.

Then one morning as Dad walked out to inspect the vine, he noticed that here and there, certain leaves were dying, certain blossoms withering. Dad was beside himself! Most of the leaves remained healthy and green, seemingly scattered among them were those that were literally dying on the vine. Regaining what he could of his usual science-teacher objectivity, he stepped carefully among the tangled mass of vines, tracing the ones on which the leaves and blooms had withered, until he found that they were all connected to a single stem. There, just above the ground, a cutworm was still chomping away, having already severed that branch. The entire vine beyond that point was dying because it was no longer attached to the roots and the stem.

Mind you, we had *plenty* of pickles that year. As it turned out, Dad had *seriously* overestimated how many cucumbers he needed to plant to satisfy his longing for his crunchy delicacy. In fact, we gave pickles to everyone we knew and *still* packed dozens of jars into the U-Haul truck when we moved back to Phoenix later that summer. That patch produced more cucumbers than Mom was either willing or *able* to deal with, and we ended selling cucumbers from a little stand out front of the house, giving cucumbers to anyone that would take them, leaving bags of cucumbers on the doorsteps of unsuspecting or unvigilant friends and neighbors, and even throwing bushel-basketfuls of cucumbers onto the farm scrap pile. That was some abundant producing vine – but not before that one branch that had been disconnected from the vine had been removed and taken away.

Jesus said "I am the true vine, you are the branches." I don't know about you, but for me it is powerful *indeed* to realize that the source of our life and strength, the vine into which each of us has been grafted by the grace of God, has its roots in the timeless truth of the eternal God. I don't know about you, but I find it an incredible comfort to know that the work of grace and love that is done in the world is *God's* work, not a function of my sometimes puny efforts. I don't know about you, but I find it a tremendous relief to know that the responsibility of producing fruit is not ours alone, that our roots are grounded in the very Creator of all things.

But all the reading of God's word, all the meditation upon the gospel of Jesus, all the pious talk and posturing in the world, will do us absolutely *no* good, unless we remain *connected*

to sustains and enlivens us. Being connected to the vine is a matter of both the heart and the will. The heart that loves all things that God has made, and the will that gives God praise for them. The heart that aches for all the sin of the world, and the will that goes out and *tells* the good news of Christ's love. The heart that believes that God alone can make a difference in the lives of the people to which we are called, and the will to let God make a difference in our *own* life. The heart that day-by-day trusts God, and the will that leads us to act as if every single one of God's promises can be counted on.

Here as we observe Mothers' Day, we sure know that what we are and what we have accomplished is not independent of the roots to which we are connected. If you haven't already done so this morning, I hope that each of you will find ways, especially today, to recognize and celebrate those who have birthed and protected and nourished you and your family. And – just in case you need it – I happen to know for a fact that there's still a decent selection of cards down at the drugstore.

But I hope you remember, too this morning, the family into which you have been adopted through the waters of your Baptism, the vine into which you were grafted by the sealing of the Holy Spirit, the fruit of that vine in your heart and in your life. [In just a moment we will have the opportunity once again to bring yet another branch into the vine of God's love and power as we welcome young Ford here into the household of God.]

And then remember that whether it's Jesus' grapes or Daddy's cucumbers – or watermelons, for that matter – the purpose, the function, the very reason for existence of *any* vine is to produce fruit. "I am the vine, you are the branches," Jesus said. "Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit." It is in bearing the fruit of Christ, it is in becoming more and more Christ-like, it is in making Christ known in our own corner of the garden of God's love that we finally fulfill our purpose as branches of the true vine.

You see, our God is a wonderful, prolific, extravagant gardener. In Christ, God has planted the vine meant to feed the whole world. If we would each of us tend to the connection and communion with Jesus Christ, the root of our being, and then realize the absolute power of abiding in the sustaining love of God's risen Son, we would have plenty enough fruit to sell at our little stand here in Uptown Columbus, plenty enough to give to anyone who will take them, plenty enough, perhaps, to leave on the doorstep of *all* our friends and neighbors.

Now that's the mother of all vines!