

## John 15: 1-11 “Axis Mundi”

“Jemez Springs Community Presbyterian Church. Serving from the heart of Jemez Springs. We remain the heartbeat of Jemez, now and into God’s future.” These words greeted me as I opened the Welcome page of the church website. This is you, telling the world who you are and what you aspire to do. What was I doing looking at your church website? Well, the Presbyterian system of matching a congregation and a pastor is not exactly an online dating service, but it has similarities. You put yourself out there in cyberspace, and y’all entrusted your Pastor Nominating Committee how to represent you, and you get matched, and then, you get to check each other out! However, there’s one important difference between the Presbyterian system and online dating sites: ours is a Spirit-led process through and through; it only works when the parties involved trust God’s Spirit and follow her lead.

As I prepared to join you in worship this morning, your welcome statement provided me with the lens through which I approached the Scripture readings for today. Together now, let us join our hearts in prayer: O Holy Spirit, open our hearts and enter in, so we may hear your Word for us, in this time, at this place. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

As you may know, I am concluding my time as Chaplain at Menaul School. Last semester, I was blessed with the opportunity to teach World Religions to the 8<sup>th</sup> graders. I confess it is only now I see the experience as a blessing; at the time, it was a real challenge for which I prayed for God’s grace every day. While teaching that class, I came across this Latin term, *axis mundi*: the Center of the World. Apparently, it is a common notion shared by many cultures, and apparently, human societies have a tendency to see themselves at the center of the World.

In one sense, *axis mundi* means “the place of origin and homeland of the people.” One example is the name for the country of China. Comprised of 2 characters, it literally means the “Middle Nation, or the Nation at the Center.” I grew up in Japan, and on the wall by our dining table hung a map of the world, I grew up looking at it every day. Guess what was at the center of that map? Japan, of course. Imagine my disorientation, when I came to this country as a high school Sophomore and saw the “real world map” in the classroom. I finally understood why the country of my origin was referred to as the “Far East.”

In contrast to this human tendency to place ourselves at the center, the collective human saga is full of stories of de-centering, dislocation and displacement. The first human experience in our Scripture is the story of Adam and Eve, who got themselves expelled from the garden for disobeying God. In the center of that garden, was the Tree of Life God had planted. Ever since then, humanity has been pushing one another off the center. The story of Jacob, running from his home after tricking his brother Esau, his son Joseph being trafficked to Egypt by his brothers, and Moses leading the Hebrews out of Egypt through the wilderness. The ancient Israelites in exile. Then there's that prodigal son, who set out for a faraway country.

These and other stories in the Bible echo in the lived experiences, of the people of West Central Africa caught in the transatlantic slave trade, the Native Americans displaced from their land, the Jewish Diaspora, countless migrants fleeing war and violence throughout history, down to what is happening to the people of Ukraine at this very moment. Even closer to home, the indigenous women and girls gone missing... In a purely geographical sense, *axis mundi*, remains elusive, for people are uprooted everywhere and the center cannot hold.

Even when no change of location is involved, things happen in life that throw us unexpectedly off-center; life happens and pulls the rug out of under our feet, leaving us feeling disconnected or simply lost.

*Axis mundi* has a spiritual dimension that is also shared widely by many religions and spiritual traditions. It is a perceived center of the world where Heaven and Earth are connected, a sacred site where Heaven meets Earth, a portal to the Divine. They are the Thin Places in the Celtic spirituality: a place where the veil between this world and the eternal world is thin. In the Sun Dance of the Native peoples of the Great Plains, it is the cottonwood tree that is carefully selected and cut down, then ritually carried to the chosen spot and becomes the connecting link between the earth and the heavens. *Axis mundi*, it is only a human concept, but it speaks of the undeniable sense that we are somehow connected to the center that does hold, where we become one with the Divine.

In today's Gospel reading from John, Jesus is speaking to his disciples right after what would be their last supper together. He knows his time has come to be de-centered, that he would be taken away from them soon. And yet, his parting words to the disciples are "abide in me, as I abide in you." Jesus tells this to the disciples who will soon find themselves on the

other side of Easter, just as you and I are. Jesus calls us to abide in him as he also abides in us, now and always. How is this to be? What image did you see as you heard the words of the Scripture spoken today? Let us follow up on that image.

He first says, “I am the true vine and my Father is the vinegrower,” revealing who he is in his relationship with God. Then he says, the second time, “I am the vine and you are the branches,” revealing who he is in his relationship with us. With these two “I am” statements, Jesus lodges himself smack in the middle between God and the community of the faithful, and he is inseparable from either one. When Jesus speaks of himself as the vine, his words are not just about himself; he’s pointing to the interrelationship of God, Jesus, and the community in the life of faith, with Jesus as the connecting center.

If Jesus as the vine *is* our *axis mundi*, the center of the world, we see how this “center” is not a static, standalone tree. It exists only because of the gardener who waters it, and it bears fruit only through the branches growing out of it. The images of the gardener, the vine, and the branches point us to an organically interconnected center, full of life and action, of pruning, growing and bearing fruit.

“To bear fruit” is a common image of the Hebrew Scriptures to speak of the community’s faithfulness. “Bearing fruit” is Jesus’s way of speaking about the works of love to which we are called. Jesus’s words “prune” the disciples, his church, just as the gardener prunes the branches, keeping our relationship with Jesus the Vine healthy and strong, which is the key to bearing fruit.

And this community may be one big intermingling mess of the branches in the vine, but all run together as they grow out of the central vine. I have a friend who has such a huge jumble of a grape vine in his backyard. The branches are indistinguishable and almost impossible to see which ones are bearing fruit, but, as a whole, it’s plenty fruitful. There are no freestanding individuals in this community, but branches who encircle one another. To live as the branches of the vine is to belong to an organic unity shaped by the hands of God who lovingly prunes it. The church, as the body of Christ, thus becomes *axis mundi*, a beating heart of a community in which members are known for the acts of love that they do in common with all other members.

When I was brought into this world, my *axis mundi* was a small church built by a young Japanese woman pastor. She studied at a women’s divinity school in Tokyo during the World War II. After the war, she spread out a map of the burnt-out Tokyo and had a vision of a church in the middle of it. She knew that the war-torn downtown Tokyo, with most of its inhabitants

displaced, needed a spiritual center that would hold. She saw the *axis mundi* where the uprooted people would be met with the Divine and find their home in it. She knew God desired a vineyard growing out of the ashes left by the war. So, Rev. Katsuno went about building a church, overcoming many challenges that she faced because she was a Christian minister, until recently a religion of the enemy, and a female leader at that; also an anomaly. When she was negotiating the land for the sanctuary, the landowner said, “in case your efforts don’t bear fruit, I will sell you the back-facing lot,” to which Rev. Katsuno responded “this is for God’s House; I’ll take the front-facing lot, thank you very much.” She was my first pastor. My mother was one of the earliest branches of the church, which had 40 members when it was chartered. 70 years later, the membership is still roughly 40. Yet, throughout the years, that church has nurtured disciples, pruned by Jesus’s words and by the loving hands of God. I left that church and went off to a far-away country, and look where I landed.

I wondered how each of you has been led to this place, to this moment, to this Center, and what story of dislocation you have lived. I wonder, too, how we collectively might grow, together as the Jemez Springs Community Presbyterian Church, serving from the heart of Jemez Springs. May we remain the heartbeat of Jemez, now and into God’s future, abiding in the love of Christ and bearing much fruit. Amen.