

Psalm 22: 25-31; John 15: 1-8

“Grapes, Not Apples and Oranges”

From you comes my praise in the great congregation;  
 my vows I will pay before those who fear him.  
 The poor shall eat and be satisfied;  
 those who seek him shall praise the Lord.  
 May your hearts live forever!  
 All the ends of the earth shall remember  
 and turn to the Lord;  
 and all the families of the nations  
 shall worship before him.  
 For dominion belongs to the Lord,  
 and he rules over the nations.  
 To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;  
 before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,  
 and I shall live for him.  
 Posterity will serve him;  
 future generations will be told about the Lord,  
 and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,  
 saying that he has done it.

Placed right before Psalm 23, the Lord is my Shepherd, which we read last week, the passage Susanna just read for us is the concluding portion of Psalm 22. It is full of praise of God who cares for the poor, feeds the hungry until they are full and wins the hearts of peoples everywhere, to the end of the earth, even the dead as well as the living. There will be unbroken communion of God’s people, not just in space but also in time; even the future generations will be told of God’s saving work, and they will carry the witness of God’s unfailing love to the people yet to be born.

It is surprising, then, that this psalm that ends on such a high note of unbounded confidence in the God of the Universe begins with the words “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” --- the very words that were on Jesus’ lips before he took his last breath on the cross, in the Gospel according to Matthew.

Psalm 22 begins with the psalmist in his darkest moment, at the bottom of the pit of despair. I invite you to read the whole psalm later; how he describes his state of being is quite remarkable and he goes on and on... Then, something happened, something shifted in the psalmist, and he moves from despair to the affirmation of life in God, not just for him personally but for the entire human existence, for all peoples in all places at all times.

What caused that shift? That is the mystery of our Easter faith: God's last word is not death but life, not abandonment but love that never lets us go, not despair but life in communion with God and all of God's children, even for those who have died and so it shall be for those who are yet to be born. The gift of faith God graced us has the power to have us claim life in the face of death. That power, that energy is God's love for the suffering world and the afflicted souls.

It is our Easter faith, because it rests in our knowing that Christ himself moved from the bottom of despair to life, through his dying on the cross and rising on the Easter morning, and by appearing to his disciples so they could be the witnesses of this good news, Life infused with God's love is stronger than death, and through the witness of the Scripture, all generations will come to know it. And now, we are the future generations entrusted with the good news, to live it and to share it with the world. We do so when we act in God's love.

On this Fifth Sunday of Easter, the Gospel reading takes us back to the words of Jesus he spoke to the disciples while he was still with them. In fact, they are Jesus' parting words to the disciples just after they have had their last supper together, on the night of his betrayal. Now, on this side of Easter, we are reminded of who Jesus is, who God is, and who we are and what we are called to do. Hear now, the Gospel of John, 15: 1-8.

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 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. I 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. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

The grapevine, the vineyard and the fruit of the vine are my favorite symbols in the Scriptures, because they hold the rich and deep dimensions of our relationship with God, with Jesus and with one another. Before Jesus used them with the disciples, they were already a common image in the Hebrew Scriptures to describe the relationship between God and God's people. In the book of Isaiah, God laments that although God planted excellent vines in the vineyard and gave them tender loving care of pruning and clearing away, only wild, sour grapes grew.

Jesus says he is the true, genuine vine that produces the fruit that God the vinegrower is aiming for. But then, Jesus introduces this new image of branches, and it is the branches that bear fruit. So, no branches, no grapes. At the same time, the branch cannot bear fruit by itself but needs to receive life-sustaining nutrients from the vine. All the while, the one who is doing the work of “growing” is God the vinegrower, clearing away unproductive branches while pruning the productive ones. So, there is this organic relationship between the vinegrower, the vine, and the branches in order to produce the fruit of the vine.

Then, Jesus says, “you all are the branches.” He is speaking to the group of eleven disciples (Judas had already left to hand Jesus over in betrayal.) He is not picking one disciple and say you’re the fruit-bearing one while others are not. What is unique about the branch image is that branches are undistinguishable from one another; they all run together out of the vine. No single branch is independently and separately connected to the vine; they are linked into the vine together in a jumble. There is no free-standing branch!

Only the vinegrower could tell which branch would bear fruit and which wouldn’t, and only the vinegrower would know just which part of the jumble to prune, so they could bear more fruit. Bearing fruit is a collective work, of the vinegrower, the vine, and the intertwined branches. There is nothing for the branches to do but to remain in the vine, and with the pruning of the vinegrower, the fruit will come.

Knowing he would be taken up from the world soon, Jesus told the group of his disciples how critical it was for them to “abide in” Jesus, which is to “remain with” Jesus. But after Jesus is taken away from them, how could they? After saying that God prunes every branch that bears fruit, Jesus tells the disciples that they have already been “cleansed” by the word that he had spoken to them. The Greek word translated here as “cleanse” is closely related to the word to “prune.” Those who listen and follow Jesus’ word are already “pruned” by it and ready to bear fruit. God’s pruning hands have been on them through Jesus’ teachings and commandments; now they need to keep them.

Just as what united the good shepherd and his own sheep was the voice of the shepherd that his sheep knew and followed into the fold, it is Jesus’ word that he had spoken to them, his teachings and his commandments that would enable them to “remain with” Jesus, and so the word of Jesus “abides in” them.

And, if the vine and branches image hold true, the disciples don't "abide in" Jesus alone. Just as the branches are intertwined in abiding in the vine, the disciples abide in Jesus by following his word together in a collective. The followers of Jesus come together to hear Jesus' word, discern what his teachings would direct us to do here and now. The intertwined branches connected to Jesus the vine, being cleansed by his word and pruned by God the vinegrower to bear fruit. What is that place called? The Church. If so, what then is the fruit that God is wanting us to produce?

It's interesting that the church world is obsessed with the word "growth." "Is the church growing?" is the question asked more often than "Is the church bearing fruit?" In fact, both are promised. Jesus says God is the vinegrower causing the vine to grow, and God clears away the branches that bear no fruit and prunes the branches that bear fruit so it can bear more. All three elements: vinegrower, vine, and branches, are essential to the production of fruit, but God the vinegrower is true actor and the original life-giver. So, what is the fruit?

"Bear fruit" in the tradition of the Hebrew Scripture is an image to speak of the community's faithfulness. In John's Gospel, "fruit" is the works of love required of Jesus' followers. To bear fruit is to act in love, to do works of love. It is rooted in Jesus' love for the community. The only measure of one's place in the faith community is to love as Jesus has loved – that is the grape from the true vine.

To measure the vitality of a church community by the "growth" in the number of members or the size of the annual budget or the pledge is to mistake apples and oranges for the grapes from the true vine. Of course, we rejoice when a new member joins the church, because the life of the church is enriched by this new branch, just as the member's life will be nourished by being part of the jumble of branches all drawing life-sustaining sap from the main vine.

When we reach out to the community and invite them to make a pledge to support the church, we are not measuring the vitality or even the sustainability of the church by how much we manage to collect; but it is truly an invitation to be part of this intricate organic collective of the vine and the branches, and to give in love, so that the pledges they make may be transformed into the works of love; that is the fruit of the vine. To measure the vitality of a church by anything else is to mistake apples and oranges for the grapes, the Jesus fruit.

Separation from the vine is the end of hope for fruit and the end of life for the branches. That is the only thing we should fear, and even there, Jesus is there, forever inviting us to abide in him.

If we the church are moved by love and acted in love, what would change in our world today? That is our Easter question.