

“Interweavings of Love”
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
I John 4:(7)16b-21; John 15:1-8

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May 3, 2015

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. ¹⁷Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹We love because he first loved us. ²⁰Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also

I am normally cautious about using the word “love” in a sermon title, not because I am against love, but because it is a word that can so easily trickle into sentimentality. Yet, love is hard to avoid when the I John 4 text we just heard contains “agape love” twelve times. Yet, my wariness made it so my eyes were drawn to the warning, “Caution: Handle with Care!”, offered by a biblical commentator on the I John reading. The writer offered, “The main danger [is if we turn First John 4’s] soaring testimony to the primacy of God’s love and the resulting consequences in human love, into something saccharine and simplistic.” (Gary Charles, in exegesis section of Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2008, p. 467.)

By contrast, our Gospel reading does not include the word “agape love.” Or does it? We will hear Jesus’ familiar words, “I am the vine, you are the branches,” as central to this text. We have a sense of what this means botanically as branches receive nutrients from the central vine, which in turn receive sustenance from the roots.

Yet, again, we are cautioned not to sentimentalize this image, such that it becomes a t-shirt that simply says, “I am a branch connected to Jesus’ vine.” If anything, we might consider, “I am a branch well-pruned by God.” Jesus’ image of vine and branches is lost if the needed maintenance of the vine is ignored, for it is only in the pruning that fruit, good fruit, plentiful fruit, can be borne. As we will discover, the fruit of the vine is not wine, but love, so there is a connection.

“I am the vine” is the last of seven “I am” statements by Jesus in John’s Gospel. Last Sunday we noted, “I am the gate,” and looked carefully at “I am the good shepherd.” Along with this morning’s, “I am the vine,” each “I am” statement offers us insight as to how we connect to the God we know in the person of Christ.

Let us listen for God’s word to us, the branches of Jesus’ vine, as we read 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.

We have a framed needlepoint with the sentence, "Love is a decision," created after a Marriage Enrichment weekend in which Lynn and I were a part. It is a conscious alternative to the phrase, "love is a feeling," which pervades our culture. "Love is a feeling" is often the content of greeting cards. I also seems to be at the heart of much advertising, as we are enticed to fall in love with everything from our cars to our coffee, our shoes to our blue jeans, our smart phones to our kitchen gadgets, our exercise machines to our snow blowers – well, perhaps not our snow blowers for they are sold more for their power more than a loving relationship. My point is, advertising's goal is for us to buy, and then to also sell by saying, "I just love my _____." (You fill in the blank.)

If someone tells me, "I just love being connected to Jesus," I admit I wonder if it is a statement of decision or feeling. What I think about is how it is hard work to be connected to Jesus the vine, and follow Jesus the shepherd, and obey the commands of Jesus at the gate. It is hard work because of the challenge of showing Christ's love and grace with those who may not readily accept it. Yet, perhaps the greater challenge is the reality Jesus' vine image is not primarily about our relationship as an individual branch with the vine, but our life together as a community of branches connected to the vine of Christ.

I have never tended fruit vines, never been a vinedresser whose work is to enhance both productivity and quality of the fruit. I have dealt with weedy vines that can entangle other bushes and climb trees to choke off life with boa constrictor strength. Pulling those vines is difficult, for they become as entangled and interwoven as that 50' extension cord or that length of rope you thought was carefully rolled up but has magically twisted and formed itself into knots.

Given my ignorance of vinedressing, I yield to Nancy Blakely's notes on the bulletin cover wherein she notes the best grapes are produced closest to the central vine. I have passed by vineyards at the start of the growing season, and recall the vines are cut back, pruned, and looking quite stark. I once cut back a clematis plant in the fall and it grew and bloomed prolifically the next summer; admittedly, that was luck, not skill or wisdom, but it illustrated the value of pruning. In John, the Greek word for pruned encompasses cutting off, or cutting back, but it means cleansing as well, with the same root word used when Jesus washes the disciples feet. (Homiletical section of Feasting on the Word, op. cit., p.475)

Yet I return to the understanding the power of Jesus' image is not the relationship to any individual branch, but to the many branches connected to the vine. Thus, the challenge of the image is to consider how we, as branches, as disciples, are not only in personal relationship with the vine, but can be in relationship with each other in ways we have never considered. The nature of vines and branches guide us.

There is a commonness to the branches of a vine, particularly after being pruned close. No branch stands out as distinct, each is a brownish-gray color, and from each will sprout green shoots signaling the hope of fruit. For biblical scholar Gail O'Day, this reveals the church as a place distinct from prevailing societal hierarchies. We are equal branches, with no one granted special privilege. She writes,

"There is neither status nor rank among the branches. Hierarchy among the branches of the vine is precluded, because all members grow out of the one central vine and are treated equally by the one gardener. [In John's Gospel], there is only one measure of one's place in the faith community – to love as Jesus has loved – and all, great and small, ordained and lay, young and old, male and female, are equally accountable to that one standard." [O'Day, Gail, in The New Interpreter's Bible, volume IX, John, Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1995, p. 760]

To that list I would add both new members and long-time members, large givers and small givers, are equally accountable to that one standard – to love as Jesus has loved. I have seen in churches where members have sought to prevail in a decision, by either claiming special privilege by virtue of their length of membership, or worse, threatening to hold the church hostage by withholding their pledges or their presence. This text is saying, if you are part of the vine, you can't threaten to take your toys, or your dollars, or yourself and go home. We are here because God has grafted us into this section of the vine of Christ.

Another challenge of our vine and branch image is that when we don't like what another branch is doing, it is not our role to pick up the pruning tool. God is the only gardener, and so, God does the pruning. I think of the one choice I have left when I go for a haircut. Perhaps the barbers are just humoring me, but the question I am asked is whether I want the back tapered or cut straight. My temptation is to ask, "What is the current style for bald people?" In Jesus' vineyard, we are not in charge of determining even the taper. We yield to God's pruning in God's time, trusting even if it cuts off something we thought we could not live without, it will in the end, keep us closer to the vine, enabling us to yield more and better quality fruit.

Mention of fruit brings us back to the dangerous word, "love," as a decision, not a feeling. Our lesson is part of Jesus' farewell address to his disciples, in which they are to decide to continue in his love, individually, and as the church. He tells them they can do so only as branches attached to the vine.

In I John, we read, "We love because God first loved us." It is never the reverse. God does not love because we first loved God. God takes the initiative to love, and out of love grafts us as a branch into the vine of Christ. It is also out of love that we are pruned – perhaps tough love, but love just the same. We can only love when attached to the vine. As I pondered this, it also occurred to me that we cannot withhold love when we are attached to the vine of Christ.

In our connection to the vine we are strengthened to yield the fruit of love in surprising and unexpected ways; ways that counter those hesitations of our minds or stirrings of our guts tempting us to say: “I could never do that!” “I could never forgive her.” “I could never reconcile with him.” “I could never risk reaching out in love to those people.” We cannot withhold love when we are attached to the vine of Christ.

An interweaving of love involves recognizing there are branches connected to the vine that are beyond our own section of the vineyard, growing places and situations different than ours, branches from whom we might feel alienated by ignorance or fear. This is where the story of the Ethiopian eunuch would have entered this morning, but we will visit his story in two weeks.

I believe we are called to cross the safe boundaries of our section of the greater vineyard, to hear the stories of those branches living in risky places. This is where we open the newspaper or keep alert to the news, where our ears and eyes were this week drawn to Nepal’s devastation and Baltimore’s tension. When we do so, we are wise to keep in mind the interweaving of our branches with those far away.

Situations of violence often cause confusion, prompt judgment, and may even close our openness. So, if we failed to take note there was a week of non-violent protests preceding what we saw this week in Baltimore, then we are wise to recognize we are feeding on the media’s limited menu of serving its audience images of violence, knowing we won’t stay tuned to hear the voices of those who are bearing the fruit of love in places of tension. With this in mind, I commend to you the letter of the National Black Presbyterian Caucus, copies of which I have placed on the tables as you leave. The short letter is not intended to be the definitive word, but it enables us to begin to listen to and hear different voices than those from our own section of the greater vineyard.

When we consciously envision an interweaving of our lives, our church, with others grafted to the vine, particularly those whose stories and experiences are much different than our own, we begin to sense that within the vine there can be no us and them. In fact, when we catch ourselves using the phrase, “Those people...,” we might well listen for the pruning shears and welcome their arrival. Other people’s stories may be a part of God’s pruning plan for our own assumptions, biases and judgments.

Love is the yield of fruit for which God the gardener waits to emerge from pruned branches. We do not prune one another – that is judgment. But as a community of faith – as branches of a common vine in a vineyard that extends past our limits – our stories, combined with the stories of those branches with different experiences, can serve as both nurturings and prunings for one another. Let us listen to all the stories of the branches of the vine, and then please the gardener with a plentiful yield of Christ’s love for one another.