

We are the Branches--Together
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Date: May 3, 2015

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“We are the Branches—Together” (On Baltimore) Homily, Pilgrim Church UCC, May 3, 2015—
Fifth Sunday of Easter (John 15:1-8)

Last summer I had a vine problem. The parsonage has a fenced in backyard and woods beyond the fence. These invasive vines (which may be Oriental Bittersweet after doing some research) have attached themselves to some of the trees and bushes and crept their way through one side of the fence. Whatever they’re called, my dog Fritz is a big fan of these vines and the hiding spots they’ve provided. I’d look out in the backyard and couldn’t find him, call him and get no response. He’s a stubborn, disobedient rescue foxhound from Tennessee. (And given his nature—the perfect dog for me as my friends and family like to say.) So I’d walk down the steps a little panicked that he got out of the yard only to have him rush out at me from underneath these vines. Fritz loved this game of hide and seek, but clearly these vines had to go.

You have to understand that I’ve lived with my parents and then in dorms and apartments before the parsonage. I don’t own a lot of tools, so just got a pair of scissors and tried to cut the vines. The scissors broke in less than 10 minutes. Then I thought, well after all those years working on the farm and throwing shot put and discus in high school, I’m strong enough to just yank them out. Not realizing that these vines have little tiny thorns. Wow, am I glad that no one but Fritz was right there to hear what happened next. Went back into the house, washed off the blood, put on a pair of gloves, and got a kitchen knife which I proceeded to use like a machete to hack away at those vines. Thankfully that method was successful! About a week later though, I was playing with Fritz in the backyard and inspected my work. Wouldn’t you know it, but some of the remnants already had little green buds sprouting. Those vines are annoyingly tenacious, to use church language and not harsher words.

So when turning to the Gospel of John this week and reading Jesus say, “I am the vine,” well there was a bit of a reaction on my part![1] To put this Biblical statement into perspective, Jesus has seven metaphorical “I Am” sayings that are unique in John’s Gospel. Even the words “I am” are symbolic since God tells Moses “I am who I am” in Exodus at the burning bush.[2] John has Jesus saying “I am” seven various metaphors to emphasize Jesus’ power and divinity. “I am the bread of life.” “I am the light of the world.” “I am the gate.” “I am the good shepherd.” “I am the resurrection and the life” “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” “I am the vine.”[3]

Why did Jesus have to say that he’s the vine? The good shepherd—who doesn’t love a good shepherd finding and taking care of lost sheep? The resurrection and the life—who doesn’t love some mystery and new life and second chances? The bread of life—I could eat bread ‘til the cows come home. But the vine? Well after the bloody and painful Oriental Bittersweet episode, I’ll just pass on that particular metaphor.

Now to be fair, the grapevine was used as a metaphor for Israel in the Old Testament. That God (the vinegrower) tends God’s people carefully, but could burn or destroy the vine if the people were unfaithful. Harsh, but an effective metaphor given the vegetation and climate in the ancient Near East. Even here in John’s Gospel, Jesus says in the beginning of our text, “I am the vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.”[4] Jesus speaks about God the vinegrower in relationship with us, removing those dead parts of us and pruning

those parts that can bear fruit like love, joy, peace, kindness, faithfulness, generosity, and so on. It's actually an interesting metaphor—particularly since we can go with a lovely grapevine.

The point of Jesus saying "I am the vine, you are the branches" is that when we're in relationship with God and each other, we can bear much fruit. We can do great things. We can be Jesus Christ's disciples out in the world making a difference. We can love one another as God loves us. We can shine our lights to witness to the power of God in our lives and in our church community here at Pilgrim. Apart from each other, we can't do a whole lot. Together—we can help God mend the world. It's the perfect metaphor for Christian community!

And we need a good, strong metaphor advocating the power of community these days. This week has been a difficult one in our world—the news out of Nepal and Baltimore is enough to just about break your heart. Turning to Baltimore, we know that there's been many different reports in the wake of Freddie Gray's death. There's been peaceful protests, riots and looting, and a declared state of emergency. And then Prosecutor Marilyn Mosby announced that six police officers will be charged with various crimes in the arrest and fatal injury of Freddie Gray. We saw the images of the CVS on fire and people throwing rocks at officers in riot gear. We also hopefully saw images of an African American boy handing out bottled water to police and over 100 clergy of different denominations and faith traditions marching in the streets on Monday to urge people to stop the violence.

President Obama's remarks on the White House lawn also struck a chord for many. When asked about Baltimore, President Obama said, "If our society really wanted to solve the problem, we could; it's just that it would require everybody saying, 'this is important; this is significant.' And, that we don't just pay attention to these communities when a CVS burns, and we don't just pay attention when a young man gets shot or has his spine snapped, but we're paying attention all the time because we consider those kids our kids."^[5]

These remarks from our president and the images of people standing in peaceful solidarity point to the power of community. In Christian terms, Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. What's striking is the language of connection we can hear: "but we're paying attention all the time because we consider those kids our kids." When we hear reports about difficult and contentious and complicated situations, do we hear "those people"? Or do we hear "our people" and that we're in this together? If we hardly ever hear "we" and "our" language, why is that?

It's easy to speak about those people out there, but wouldn't it be something if we said our communities are significant and important and we're paying attention all the time? It was Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who once wrote from his jail cell in Birmingham that, "Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly."^[6] Dr. King also said that "a riot is the language of the unheard." What would happen if we paid attention and listened to peoples' experiences in tough neighborhoods, making it our priority to solve problems that folks face every day?

I don't have easy answers, though it's important to ask the questions. I've seen the light with this metaphor that Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. Why? Because it speaks to our significant connection to each other and to God in these complex times. After the broken scissors/bloody hands/kitchen knife machete incident at the parsonage with those vines, it was hard to imagine ever appreciating Jesus saying "I am the vine" again. Yet, maybe God is tenacious and divinely persistent and keeps wrapping God's self around us to grab our attentions and keep us firmly rooted together.

If we are really with Jesus and beside each other on our branch, we can bear much fruit and become his disciples. For we can be connected to each other in community. We can

remember that “whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.” Jesus is the vine. And we are the branches—together. May it be so with us. Amen.

[1] John 15:5.

[2] Exodus 3:14.

[3] As outlined by Mark Allan Powell, Fortress Introduction to the Gospels, 119.

[4] John 15:1-2.

[5] President Obama on the situation in Baltimore, <http://go.wh.gov/sjSAyV>

[6] Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963.