

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

The Living Bridge

Gospel Lesson

John 15:1-9 (NRSV)

"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. ⁹As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love."

Bible/Sermon Focus

This week's sermon posed the question, "What if we all decided to see ourselves as a connected community intertwined together as a vine and branches by the nourishing love of God's Holy Spirit, bearing fruit to make the world safer, healthier, and more hospitable?"

The scripture this week affirms the value of living in that kind of a community. John 15 is a part of a long section of Jesus' teaching, the final section of teaching he offers before he is crucified. Jesus has told his disciples about his impending death, and then offers words of comfort by promising that the Holy Spirit will soon be with them, to teach and guide their lives. The metaphor of the vine we read in chapter 15 immediately follows this promise.

Jesus assures his followers that we are not intended to be separate, isolated, and in conflict with one another. Instead, we are intended to be intertwined as vine and branches. The metaphor is offered as an invitation to "abide," that is, to "remain" or "dwell" with Jesus. This idea is important; it appears 9 times in this passage! It is therefore noteworthy that the timing of this metaphor comes just before Jesus' death, at which time his physical earthly body will no longer be present. Jesus thereby connects the promise of the coming Spirit with the idea of abiding in him. To abide in Jesus is to be connected by the loving presence of the Holy Spirit.

And yet the metaphor is also offered as a word of caution. The branches that are not fruitful, even though they are alive, are pruned from the vine. Dr. Allen Bright Callahan writes, "The excised, erstwhile living branches, separated from the vine on which they

had imposed for life, now dry up and die, withered and fit for the tinderbox." (*True to Our Native Land*, p. 204) Pruning unfruitful branches is how the vintner ensures the health of the entire vine. And significantly, branches don't get to prune other branches. In this metaphor, Jesus makes it clear that God is in charge of the vineyard.

In a season of divisiveness, bitterness, and hostility, the community that Jesus describes is radically counter-cultural. We live in a world of "haves" and "have-nots," and the gap is widening all the time. We live in a world of "normal" and "other," and that which is "other" is judged as wrong or bad, or even an object of scorn.

In contrast, the community described by Jesus is intimately interconnected, woven together for the good of the whole. It is a vision of a communion in which each one realizes how deeply dependent we are on one another. The Jesus vineyard does not presume that each branch is exactly the same, but that together the vineyard bears good fruit for the sake of the divine vintner.

Discussion Questions

1. The sermon featured a video about the Meghalaya region of northeastern India where communities walk across bridges formed from living trees. What does the metaphor of the "Living Bridge" mean to you and how might we apply it to the church?
2. What does it mean to "abide" in Jesus?
3. Are there any areas of your life that are not fruitful and may need some self-pruning?
4. What spiritual fruit is your life bearing for the sake of God's mission in the world?
5. What is one thing you might do to cooperate with God in the creation of the counter-cultural community that Jesus describes?

Prayer

O Divine Vintner, Lord of the Vineyard, connect us together that we may abide in you. Weave us together as branches of the One True Vine, and nourish us with your Spirit. Reveal in us the branches that need your careful pruning, and be gentle as you cut them away, we pray. May the fruit we bear be pleasing to you, as an offering of love and grace to the world around us. To you, in the name of Jesus, and by the power of the Spirit we pray, Amen.

"I am the vine; you are the branches."