

St Mary's Episcopal Church, Anchorage, Alaska
Message by the Rev. Catherine Amy Kropp
Scripture: 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

Sunday, May 2, 2021
Fifth Sunday of Easter

Beloved



True Vine!

“Beloved, let us love one another...” (1 John 4:7)

So begins the passage today from this first letter of John. This evocative and mysterious testimony to a beloved people within a beloved community. It is so soothing to hear just this one word “Beloved” or, as Tracey said in the translation we used, “Dear friends... let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.” (1 John 4:7)

Love, birth, life, knowledge, God, one another, and ourselves all woven together. An immersive and emergent reality, an enormous network, a tangled web within our consciousness.

And in the Gospel, we discover this tangle, this reality, this shared consciousness in the parable of the vine: Jesus is the true vine, God is the gardener or the vinegrower, and all of us as the branches. God abiding in us and us in God. And this word “abiding”, like “beloved,” so tender and intimate. (John 15:1-8)

The image of the vine overwhelms the idea that we are individuals who are separate, autonomous, sovereign and self-directed. Instead we are part of something all the time, woven together.²

As Brian Stoffregen puts it, “To live as the branches of the vine is to belong to an organized unity shaped by the love of Jesus.”³

“An organized unity shaped by the love of Jesus.” A great synergy of being in community.

It reminds me of the scientific understanding that the forest itself has a social life. Within the soil and roots, the trees, plants, fungi and microbes are thoroughly connected. Together they even form what can be called a superorganism. As Ferris Jabr writes, “There are no individuals. There aren’t even separate species. Everything in the forest is the forest.”⁴

Understanding that the trees are social creatures reminds me of the parable of the vine.

When Jesus talks about the true vine, this is not a forest vine, of course, but a grapevine, with the fruit being the grapes that become the wine that become the sacrament that we consume and become ourselves. We are immersed in a sacramental vine of new and emerging, abundant life.

And you and I are necessary to this sacrament of God’s love within the vineyard of life. In our sacred work of knowing, learning, growing, being we are all branches on the vine. God’s love is made complete through us, as we wake up to the connection and mutuality that flows and moves through us.

Let us become attached to the true vine of Christ, abiding there. And we don’t have to work at bearing fruit. This is a gift that just flows through us!

Ronald Cole-Turner: “... God is love—restless, creative, self giving, opening, flowing out into the other, coming back in new wholeness. Love gives birth...”⁵

It feels like we are within an interminable, slow process of re-birth, letting go of what we want, and opening up to what is new.

As we consider what it will be like someday to emerge from this pandemic, we know that going back to what wasn’t working so well, our sense of individualism especially, is not a good idea. Maybe there are things we really don’t want to go back to.

There is a choice to make. To abide or not. To be connected or not. Abiding in the vine, in new ways, or perhaps realizing the vine in ways we didn’t see before, and overcoming the fears that divide and separate us.⁶

Isn't it true that we have the chance to emerge from this pandemic, connected in new ways and becoming the vine, abiding in it with God, in the web of our humanity and our consciousness?

Isn't it true that we see ourselves as a global human family now, in ways we didn't see or feel before the pandemic, even though we were always a global human family?

Isn't it true that there is a reckoning with systems and institutions that perpetuate oppression and discrimination and violence. A reckoning that wasn't happening until we started to see ourselves as connected?

Isn't it true that there is an expanding understanding among those who are privileged that there is work to do to dismantle and rebuild in order to abide within a vine that is life-giving to all?

Isn't it true that justice in one moment, in one trial, in one city, like the recent trial of Derek Chauvin, is uncovering the injustice in so many other places and moments?

Isn't it true that we are connecting in ways unimaginable before? right now through technology we are gathering across great distances, yet as one body; across many time zones, yet in this one moment?

And so as John writes, "Beloved, let us love another..." (1 John 4:7) The letter of John offers a witness to something so big and deep and broad and real. Let us remember how this letter begins, with this incredibly beautiful testimony by an early beloved community of Jesus, offering their testimony.

"We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it...We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete." (1 John 1:1-4)

Amen.

READINGS

1 John 4:7-21

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love 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. There 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. We love because he first loved us. Those 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. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

John 15:1-8

Jesus said to his disciples, "I am the true 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. 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."

¹ True Vine, from Art in the Christian Tradition, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. <https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=54148> [retrieved May 1, 2021]. Original source: Anthrovik, Flickr Creative Commons.

² “Thus the parable of the Vine challenges all of us whose lives have been constructed largely on the modern idea of the sovereign individual; from this standpoint, acts in a community tend to be seen as outside the central spaces of our lives. The church thus appears as something we are “part of,” apart from our major spheres of life at home and work. Jesus’ parable, however, through its imagery suggests a living and growing community of faith, a site of productivity and increase.” Stephen A. Cooper in *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide* (Feasting on the Word: Year B volume) (Kindle Location 15611). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

³ “The communal life envisioned in the vine metaphor raises a strong challenge to contemporary Western models of individual autonomy and privatism. At the heart of the Johannine model is social interrelationship and corporate accountability. The vine and branches metaphor exhorts the community to steadfastness in its relationship to Jesus, a steadfastness that is measured by the community’s fruits (vv. 4-5)... To live as the branches of the vine is to belong to an organized unity shaped by the love of Jesus. The individual branch is subsumed into the communal work of bearing fruit, of living in love and so revealing itself to be one of Jesus’ disciples (vv. 8-16). To live according to this model, then, the church would be a community in which members are known for the acts of love that they do in common with all other members. It would not be a community built around individual accomplishments, choices, or rights, but around the corporate accountability to the abiding presence of Jesus and corporate enactment of the love of God and Jesus.” Brian P. Stoffregen, Exegetical Notes, “John 15.1-17,” accessed May 1, 2021, <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/john15x1.htm>.

⁴ Ferris Jabr, “The Social Life of Forests,” *The New York Times*, December 3, 2020, sec. Magazine, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/12/02/magazine/tree-communication-mycorrhiza.html>.

⁵ Ronald Cole-Turner in *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide* (Feasting on the Word: Year B volume) (Kindle Location 15445). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

⁶ “This text forces head-on confrontation with fears that divide and separate people who exist together on the planet.” Claudia Highbaugh in *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide* (Feasting on the Word: Year B volume) (Kindle Location 15508). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.