

Sermon 5/3 Easter 5b

I want to begin today's sermon with us thinking about vineyards. It's the metaphor that Jesus uses in the Gospel reading. Potable water was scarce in the arid climate of Israel. It was always safer to drink the fermented grape juice, as the alcohol eliminated most bad bacteria, and stuff. Water was often contaminated so drinking it was dangerous. The fermentation process made wine and beer safer.

Have you noticed winemaking is popping up in some of the strangest places?

In the past we associated Wineries with the sunny slopes of France, Germany and Italy. True there were a few in New York State that made a sherry I used to drink in Seminary. (Back then no hard liquor was allowed). In the last 40 years wines from sunny California began winning awards. More recently, Chile or Argentina have taken advantage of the southern hemisphere climate like the American West Coast.

But in the last decade or so, wineries are being developed near St. Louis, Mo, South Dakota, even Door County, Wisconsin. Ice wine is now produced in Canada. Closer to home you can find a developing vineyard near the Huntley Outlet Mall along I-90.

Did you know grapevines are hacked down to almost nothing when being pruned? There is a twisting "trunk" down to the soil and a couple of "arms" reaching out sideways along the supporting horizontal cables. They look all but dead. Yet by late summer, green foliage has sprouted profusely; new shoots hiding old branches. Come Fall, clusters of grapes develop on the newly sprouted branches. Amazingly, the radical pruning produces an abundance of fruit. There is a lesson there. If you want something new you may have to cut back on the old. If you have ever visited a Winery or a wine-tasting no doubt you gained some knowledge about the vines and grapes; the process of extracting the juice, fermentation, aging and bottling. Often the best part comes at the end of the tour with a wine - tasting. Enough of those little jiggers of samples and you're ready to buy a whole case!

In ancient times, wine and beer were the most common daily source of liquids for most people. Jesus knew that his disciples were familiar with the care of grape vines to produce wine. As you know, Jesus often in his teachings uses a context that would be familiar and known to his hearers.

Jesus knew these images were a part of the religious heritage of the Jewish nation. In the Old Testament, Israel is visualized as the vine or vineyard of God. The vine had actually become the symbol of the nation of Israel. It was the emblem on the coins of the Maccabees, just a generation before Jesus. Supposedly there was a great vine of

gold sculptured upon the front of the inner sanctum of the temple that had been fashioned from the offerings of the faithful as a visible tribute to God.

So it was that a vine as a symbol of Israel was ingrained Jewish Imagery. Hence when Jesus says, "I am the true vine." the disciples are ready to learn from this metaphor.

Jesus transforms this imagery and makes it into a new understanding of how we are to believe. The true, real, genuine vine is not the nation of Israel. Belonging to it will not save you: For the prophets have rightly complained that the nation has turned into a wild, degenerate vine. Jesus dismisses the belief that being of Jewish blood is automatically the way to God's salvation.

God has created the whole of humanity and desires all to be restored and saved. Therefore being a branch on the mystical vine, connected to Jesus Himself, is what is necessary for a holy, purpose driven, spirit-filled life. Jesus is the eternal, life-giving connection to God. Grounded in Divine Life he supplies the power, the grace, the life-force to live, grow and be productive. Through Him we are nurtured to do all the things we are capable of doing. With God's help the possibilities become limitless.

Here then is the spiritual principle: you and I are branches of the true vine. The branch has no life unless there is a constant and unimpeded connection to the vine. If we are his disciples, we remain in touch, grafted to him and utterly dependent upon him. This is what Jesus means when he explains that "you abide in him and He abides in you".

I may have mentioned before that 'abide' is a rather quaint word used to describe this relationship. Essentially, it means to live, remain, stay, to be so connected that if you see one you will always see the other as well.

Jesus draws out further benefits of this connection. Abiding gives assurance of answered prayer. Abiding in him means that the Holy Spirit will come and dwell, literally make a home, an abode, in you.

Best-selling author, Rick Warren, in his book "The Purpose Driven Life" explains how Life in God through Christ gives you a purpose and reason for living and believing.

He states simply that the whole purpose in life is:

1) to love God (Worship)

- 2) to be part of God's family (Fellowship)
- 3) to become like God (Discipleship)
- 4) to serve God (Ministry)
- 5) to tell others about God (Evangelism)

Wow! What a plan for a blessed life of self-contained happiness! (Did you know that a better translation of the Greek word *Mararios* used in the Sermon the Mount, also called the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the meek and so on actually means to be happy or blissful.)

So then, how do we live our lives day by day to have such fulfillment.? We must keep contact with Jesus. Deliberately keep ourselves like branches grafted into the Vine which is Christ Jesus. Jesus promises that the power of the Holy Spirit flows into us through this connection. The power, this grace as we call it in church- talk, nurtures us, transforms us.

Its something like having a sponsor in AA or a counselor in Weight Watchers whom you call upon when tempted. They remind us, support us, guide us. We are urged to stay on the right path, keep the faith, remain strong in hope and generous in love.

This is the beauty of Jesus - teaching. The spiritual life can naturally grows in us like branches on a vine and eventually, bear good fruit. Were we not all grafted into the vine at our Baptism? We are growing and moving ever towards the time of harvest. Then we will be gathered into eternal life for we have born much fruit.

What is this fruit? Classic Theology listed these nine fruits of the Holy Spirit. They are:

Love, gladness, peace, patience, friendliness, kindness, loyalty, gentleness, and self-control.

Who would not agree that the world and our lives need these things. They are, of course, expressed in various ways at different times. They are given to build up the community and keep us moving more and more towards wholeness.

Here's an example: Exceptional pastoral gifts enlighten teaching by sensitive perception of others uniqueness. The ability to empathize, to walk in another's shoes as it were, allow information, even knowledge, understanding and wisdom to be present in such a way that it is helpfully received by others.

Trinity Church is grounded in God as we are all changing through union with Christ. Welcome means accepting anyone who is here as a fellow traveler on the journey, the

path leading to a life transformed by love, God's love, and our love. Don't we all come here with burdens, mistakes, shortfalls, or hurts seeking forgiveness and new life.

Believe me, an Ordinary Christian life can be lived in an extraordinary way.

How? By an active faith, belief that what we hope for is possible, and that true love never fail. It is the kind of love we heard in the reading from the first letter of John. It is the love St. Paul speaks about in I Corinthian 13.

“Love is patient; love is kind; love is never envious, or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

In whatever comes our way, let us effectively use prayer, scripture reading, pastoral counseling, the sacraments, the companionship and support of fellow Christians and above all, the worship of God to minister to our needs and the needs of others.”
Indeed, we are to forgive others because we ourselves have been forgiven so many things.

Jesus suffered and died and was risen that we might know Him and abide in Him. May this community grow more and more into what God wants it to be. Amen.