

BEARING FRUIT

(07/18/2021)

Scripture Lessons: Galatians 5:16-26
John 15:1-17

“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.” (John 15:5)

The gospel passage that we read this morning, Jesus’ teaching about God, himself, us, and the world, a teaching expressed in and through the metaphor of the vine and the branches, is one of my favorite scripture passages. Jesus’ spiritual guidance is especially appropriate as we, the gathered church, return to worship, as we resume and renew our commitment not only to this community of faith but also to life, to a world from which we were separated and perhaps even alienated by the coronavirus pandemic and its attendant restrictions.

As someone who would be typologically categorized as a thinking type, I initially found Jesus’ way of teaching confusing. I entered theological school with a strong background in science and philosophy. I knew how to learn from lectures, books, and articles. When I got to theological school, I felt comfortable reading the major works in systematic theology and biblical studies. As a thinking type, my one great passion has been to understand.

Much to my dismay, I discovered that Jesus did not teach concepts, as the great philosophers through the ages had done. Much to my dismay, I discovered that he was more of a poet than a theologian. He told stories. He talked about people who build their houses on sand and people who build their houses on rock. He talked about a sower who scattered precious seed on all kinds of ground--some hard, rocky, impenetrable, and some soft, rich, dark, and fertile. He told us about a pearl of great price, a treasure hidden in a field. He told us that a grain of wheat must die before it can bring forth new life. He told a little story, then he just left it there with the assumption or at least the hope that we understood the point he was trying to make.

I had no idea why he did this, why he taught through metaphors, through symbols, through parables. Some of his stories probably never really happened, they were not historically verifiable. I wondered why he was being so obtuse, since I knew that this wasn’t a good way to teach, especially to teach something as important as what Jesus taught.

I did take comfort in the realization that Jesus’ disciples struggled with his style of teaching as much as I. I discovered, to my delight, that, as recorded in each of the three synoptic gospels, Jesus’ Parable of the Sower and the Seed was followed by his disciples’ request that he *explain* the parable. In the eighth chapter of Luke, we read the following:

Then his disciples asked him what this parable meant.

As I said, I found it comforting that Jesus' disciples were no more cognizant of the true meaning of his teaching than I (though I should not have drawn great comfort from this). However, I found Jesus' response to their request that he be a little more specific to be even more confusing. We read,

He [Jesus] said, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but to others I speak in parables, so that 'looking they may not perceive, and listening they may not understand.'"

I did not find this response to be either comforting or enlightening, and I suspect that the disciples were not thrilled by it either. For me, it raised more questions than it answered.

It wasn't until I began to study myth that I came to understand Jesus' style of teaching. Joseph Campbell, the great mythologist, once said that a myth is a story that may or may not be true on the outside, but it is profoundly true on the inside. A myth, a fairy tale, a work of literature may not be historically true, but it can be psychologically and spiritually true. And the psychological and spiritual truth is the truth that really matters.

This insight helped me to better grasp the deep psychological and spiritual truths of not only our own faith but also other spiritual paths. I discovered that the deepest truths were the obscure "teachings" of the mystics. These "teachings" touch us. They move us. They are more experiential than conceptual. They help us to *experience* the deep inner truths of a spiritual path, not to understand these "truths" with our minds. It is the *experience* that enlightens us, that transforms us, that heals us, not our cognitive grasp of dogma, doctrine, or history.

It is with a certain degree of trepidation that I venture the following criticism of Jesus' response to his disciples' question about the meaning of the Parable of the Sower and the Seed. I think Jesus should have said, "I teach in metaphor and parable because this is the only way these deep inner truths can be taught, the only way that the transforming, healing power of these deep inner truths can be experienced. I can't tell you what the experience of the kingdom of God is like because you wouldn't understand it. All I can do is point. So, this is what I do—I point through metaphor and symbol, through parable and story. I can only take you to the door and open it; you will have to walk through it by yourself."

Once again, it's not for me to suggest what Jesus might have said, but he could have quoted the ancient Chinese mystic Lao Tzu who, in the Tao te Ching, said,

*The name that can be named
is not the eternal Name.*

*The tao that can be described
is not the eternal Tao.*

Jesus could have told his disciples, “This is the reason why I don’t tell you in conceptual language what God is like; I can’t. Because if I did, it wouldn’t be God.”

One of the major themes of the Easter season, from which we have just emerged, is connection. Connection or reconnection with Jesus is central to the disciples’ experiences of Jesus as the risen Christ. It was the experience of this connection, this evolving relationship that transformed them from disciples into apostles, from followers of Jesus into those who were charged with carrying on the healing ministry that Jesus had entrusted to them.

The metaphor of the vine and the branches is about connection. In this metaphor, it appears that God is symbolized by the ground. It is notable that the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich described God as “the Ground of all Being.” God gives rise to all that is. Everything draws its life, its being, and finds its ultimate identity in God. Everything and everyone, every single person is an expression, an incarnation of this Ground of all Being.

In the metaphor, it appears that Jesus Christ is the vine that arises out of this ground. Jesus drew his identity, his spiritual strength, and his healing power from this ground. The vine carries life and energy upward; it incarnates this life and energy. The ground is important, but without the vine there would be no fruit.

If God is the ground, and if Christ is the vine, then we are the branches. Through us the vine moves outward. If we look at a grapevine, we will see that there are many branches of different shapes and sizes. The branches have a *raison d’être*. It is simply to bear fruit. In the metaphor of the vine and the branches, the grapes are the fruit that we bring forth. What is this fruit? In his letter to the Galatians, as we heard this morning, the apostle Paul tells us what this fruit looks like in his enumeration of the various “fruits of the Spirit.”

The metaphor of the vine and the branches speaks to the experience of connection. It illumines our connection with Christ, with God, and with one another. Each branch on a vine is ultimately connected with every other branch. Whether we realize it or not on either a cognitive or an experiential level, we are all connected with each other through the vine.

Following Jesus’ crucifixion, the disciples felt lost and confused. They believed they had lost their connection with Jesus, with their Lord. Since Jesus was their primary connection with God, they probably felt cut off or separated from God. They were tempted to go back, to try to fit into the old structures that had previously connected them with God. However, they found it difficult to fit into the old containers, the containers they had outgrown. They found it difficult to put the new wine they had experienced in and through Jesus into the old wineskins, wineskins that could no longer contain the powerful, intoxicating, transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

In his resurrection, Jesus was transformed from body to spirit. The disciples' post-resurrection encounters with their risen Lord were also transformative. The disciples experienced a reconnection with their Lord, a sense of his presence within and among them. They realized that the vine was still there. They, as branches, were still connected to him, and through him to God. Then they began to realize that, through him, they were connected to each other and to all of life.

There are times when we, like the disciples, feel lost, confused, depressed, and perhaps even alienated from God. We may feel this way following the death of a loved one. We may feel empty or dead inside. We may feel that we have lost the meaning of our life. When we feel this way, we need to rediscover a sense of this deep spiritual connection. We need to rediscover our connection with our Lord, and through him our connection with God, with each other, and with life. As we do this, we may rediscover and experience our connection with our loved one. We may also be able to rediscover our connection with the future.

This parable, a parable of apostleship, is a reminder that it is not about us, or it is not all about us. Jesus reminds us that the meaning of our life, the essence of our calling as disciples is to bear fruit. He reminds us that, as incarnations of God, *which we are as branches of the vine*, we are called to play an important role in the evolution of life. We are called to contribute to life in our own little way, in our little corner of the world. As seemingly insignificant as we believe our contribution may be, it is of tremendous importance to God in the great scheme of life! We make our contribution as individuals and as a church, a fellowship of Christians who reach out to each other, to our community, and to the world.

As Christians, we do not reach out to each other simply because we would like to build a better world, as many good people of different faiths or no faith may do. We also do not reach out to each other because Jesus told us to do so. We bear fruit as an expression of the indwelling Christ who lives in the world through us. As James, Paul, Augustine, and Luther remind us, faith gives rise to works. If we have faith, we can't not give to the world!

As Christians, we have the conscious awareness, the faith, the conviction that Christ, the vine, is present in us--creating us, transforming us. As Christians, we have the conscious awareness, the faith, the conviction that Christ flows through us, that through us Christ is creating, is transforming the world. Through us, Christ is bringing a new world into being, a world that incarnates the kingdom of God.

The metaphor of the vine and the branches brings a fundamental truth to our conscious awareness. It reminds us that those who abide in God's love are capable of great things. When I

talk about doing great things, I'm not talking about levitating, moving mountains, or walking on water. I'm talking about doing *really* great things--like loving! Forgiving someone, having compassion for someone, reaching out to someone in need is a much greater miracle than walking on water! Walking on water doesn't make this a better world, and it doesn't make us a better person. Becoming more loving, becoming more compassionate, does.

The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, describes the nature of the fruit we are called to bear. He tells us that when we know that we, as branches, are an integral part of the vine, the Holy Spirit will guide our thoughts, our feelings, and our actions. Paul tells us that "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control." In other words, as branches, our thoughts, our feelings, and our actions are expressions of the indwelling Spirit of Christ.

God is the ground, Christ is the vine, and we are the branches. It is all about connection. There may be times when we feel alone, when we feel separated from God, when we may even doubt that there is a God. But we are never alone! We can never be cut off from our source, from the Ground of all Being, from the true vine, and from the indwelling life of the Spirit. We can no more exist apart from God and Christ than a branch can exist apart from the vine.

This is what we are about as a church. Through our worship, our study, our fellowship, and our mission outreach, we rediscover, reaffirm, and strengthen our connection to the vine, and we come to the deep experiential realization of our deep inner identity as branches.

Then we go forth to bear fruit, bringing the light of Christ's healing, reconciling, joyful presence to a world that desperately needs it.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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