

Easter 5 B The Church, Branches and Relationships

Acts 8:26-40

1 John 4:7-21

John 15:1-8

This gospel, comparing Jesus to a grape vine, runs a risk of getting sidetracked by that traditional human understanding, or perhaps I should say misunderstanding, that in order for God to like you have to use the same language about Him that I do. All this business about “those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit and apart from me you cannot do anything.” Confusion comes when this is interpreted as: apart from the church (or even apart from my church) you can do nothing. But there is a difference, sotto voce, sub rosa, under the table, between the church and Jesus.

Since the church is an institutional structure with which we deal, it is a visible form, and the tendency is to forget, unless we’re careful, the heart of the form that gives it meaning. The church has no meaning without Jesus or, if it does, it would be a meaning I’d want to shake off the ends of my fingers. So the question does not regard my branch on the vine only. After all, what makes a vine fruitful is having more than one branch. It would take a lot of vineyard to make much wine if every vine had only one branch.

So I propose that the unhappy divisions into which Christianity has fallen, could be, were we a bit more charitable about each other, blessings. They do increase the richness of the human community’s worship of God. I do not worship God like a Presbyterian. And given my preferences, it’s a relief that the Episcopalian style is present in the palette so that I don’t have to do it their way.

The only difficulty with this is that I know Presbyterians (and others, even a few evangelically inclined Episcopalians), who, if they attend a “high” Episcopalian service, think they have dropped through the floor into some exotic alien culture and are participating in a mysterious and probably sordid pagan rite. In order for their sense of devotion to be satisfied they need not only a Presbyterian style, but also the sense that the farther one departs from that style, the more inadequate one’s worship becomes. This is where the problem enters.

There is nothing wrong with huge divergences of style in God’s worship. All the way from the silent Quaker Meeting – without words, without music – to the Ethiopian Eucharist in which the celebrant has thirteen different Eucharistic prayers and an orchestra of percussion instruments, it can be good worship.

Now, from Ethiopian Orthodox to Quaker is a great distance. But it’s all part of humanity seeking to express its love of God and also seeking a God they may love. What’s wrong is not the diversity, but the lack of charity about the diversity. This has always, in the secret recesses of my mind, bothered me about some forms of the ecumenical movement. We don’t need unity first as a means of charity, we need charity first as a means of appreciating the variety forms in which the Holy Spirit truly express itself.

So, when talking about the vine and the branches, we need to remember that the vine can have a lot of different branches, some of which may be grafts because, while on the same vine we are, they don’t bear the same kind of grapes we do.

Let’s go one step farther with this image. “The branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in

the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.” What does it mean to abide in Christ? I do not think it means reaching a satisfactory stasis, because branches deriving nourishment from a vine stock don’t just sit there, they grow and keep growing all through the season. The people who created this metaphor were quite aware of that. They expected branches to grow. So abiding in Christ does not mean to get to a crystallized position in either faith or morals and then sit there on our propositional notions waiting for something worthwhile to hatch from them. There is a great deal of uncertainty in abiding in Christ, because we are not fully acquainted with him in whom we abide. In honest abiding there is no stasis.

To abide in Christ has more to do with direction than with state of belief attained. This “abiding” has to do with what it means to love God. My love would be disastrous if I were to say, “I cannot love you until I fully know you.” That would never happen. As a matter of fact, most of the things I love in this world, I don’t know at all well. They keep on unfolding before my face. I go hiking and the same mountain in January is certainly a different experience than in July. It’s different in the early summer when covered with Avalanche Lilies than it is in September when the white of the lily has been replaced by the blue of Alpine Gentian. In going over the same trail again and again – it is noticed change which increases my knowledge and allows love to expand. But if one did not love enough to return to the same trail, one could never be instructed by and have love deepened because of its variety.

This is one reason our services have a three year cycle of scripture readings. The folks who designed it figured that by the time three years had past we could start over again and, in theory, would have matured enough to find different things in the same lessons. Well, it is the church’s job to be optimistic about humanity. Sometimes it actually happens. I would not want to preach the same sermon now that I was preaching a decade ago – not that they were bad, but they would no longer be who I am. We have fixed forms of prayer for the same reason we have a three year cycle of scripture readings. Not only are there certain things just worth saying well over and over again, but also, as we change, the meaning of the liturgy keeps on unfolding as we do. If it doesn’t, the proper response is to approach your priest, or deacon, or whoever is in charge of the zoo, and say: “Things are becoming a bit dry. How about, in some of your sermons, addressing the deepening of the liturgy? Bring some new things out of it and see what happens.” Now one needs to be careful with this prescription, you might scare the clergy to death. But in a well conducted congregation such things are possible.

So, when we think about being a branch and bearing fruit, think not only about there being all sorts of branches on the vine, but also about the branch growing and changing as it is nourished. As we heard recently, it does not yet know, as a bud, what it will become in blossom and in fruit. And we do not either. This is why the direction of the Christian life is created by hope, informed by faith and love. It is not created by the crystallization of a belief structure.

Those crystalized belief structures (a.k.a. systematic theologies, creeds and such like) exist to inform us, to give us platforms to stand on, and, sometimes, the courage to discard a belief system. This can be a most important piece of progress in a spiritual life, and that, of course, is what we’re after. To develop the independence and courage to discard a belief system is a key spiritual advance. There is as much growth, there is as much faith, hope and love, in the discarding of belief as in the accepting of it. This is all part of what it means to be a branch nourished by the vine.

To put it in a different and slightly ridiculous way, I sometimes see a church which says, “Oh! I’m a branch off the vine. I like being in blossom. I’m never going to do anything else.” So they bloom

and bloom and bloom and when the time comes to make wine there's nothing to make it with. Nothing wrong with blooming, but something very wrong with loving blooming so much that we don't see the fulness of being that God's love offers: bud, blossom, fruit and wine. We are to be all things.

Change is an inherent part of the Christian life. Nothing is excepted from it, unless we make the impossible claim that our relation with God and our knowledge of God need to partake of the constancy of God himself. That claim would, at least to my nostrils, waft a faint odor of arrogance. If there is anything constant, which does not change, it is God, not us and, therefore, not our ways of understanding God. They are a part of us and are mutable, as all else human is mutable – scripture, doctrine and institution, tradition, dogma and law.

This does not mean that consistency and holding to belief in the face of opposition are bad things. They may be good things. But keeping one's promises also involves change. I do not maintain my marriage vows by treating my wife the same way I treated her thirty years ago. That would be a failure at the most fundamental level of the promise. The same, I think, is true with God. God not only abides within us, God must be allowed to grow within us. The fundamental chunk of the Christian life is not getting that right answer, but working with ourselves, working with our communities so that we become the kind of place which is loose jointed enough, open enough, with enough room for that growth which God is always seeking to introduce into human history. To love each other, as John talks of it in his letter, means to constantly be searching for the Spirit in one's fellow Christians, and, if the truth be known and acted on, in the world also, since the Spirit of God does not cease acting at the outer edge of the narthex. We are to be searching always for where God is seeking to break through. To love another person is to assist God to a fuller expression within him or her. That is certainly one way of loving. And if God is, in fact, the center of things, that in which things cohere, if he is the way, the life and the truth, then the foundation of our love for each other is to seek God, trying to be the way, the life and the truth for and within each other. It does not mean just to see the good side of someone else. That runs the risk of falling into that crystallizing, static attitude discussed earlier. It is to seek the direction of growth, the direction that God is pulling.

I'll tell a story and then bring this to a close. The story has to do with a church committee. The committee had been given the task of developing a way to explore vocations – both ordained and lay. They talked about vocation as if it were a thing that a person had. You're called or not called to run the mimeograph machine. You are either called or not called to do or be X, Y, or Z. That's understanding vocation as if it's a computer chip imbedded in your soul and you need to find the way to activate it. I don't think it's a helpful image. Vocations are not possessions. They are not chunks of our being lying around waiting to be activated. They are vectors, they are directions of motion. In the infinite mercy of God, if one's first direction is thwarted, one is offered another. No one has just one vocation.

A modified vocation may not be quite as good as the first, it may not be expressive of that toward which God was originally pulling us. But that doesn't mean it isn't a true direction. This happens in human love all the time. Sometimes it doesn't happen. I sometimes see families which work well with each other as long as the children are being raised. When that direction comes to an end, the couple fails to find a new direction, a new development of love, a new aspect of ministry and the marriage, spiritually if not legally, comes to pieces. Vocations not only can shift, the maintenance of love demands that they shift.

In loving relations, and in our relation with God, to love and be loved means to twist and to turn and

to seek a new direction when old ones are blocked. But always we must take seriously that sometimes what looks like a block to our growth isn't a block but a challenge. One of the greater tasks of spiritual discernment is to detect when an impediment to growth needs to be abandoned and something new explored or when there is a reasonable possibility of working with the challenge to create something important and new. The line is sometimes fine indeed. It is this sort of decision making which forms the foundation for the creation and nurture of a spiritual life. It's not an easy sort of decision making. But the church exists to provide resources, a framework, for this sort of decision making about our relation with God. Does the branch that we are need to be pruned, does it need, perhaps, a bit of fertilizer, do the grapes that I'm bearing need to be trimmed back to encourage some of them to be larger? It is the decisions, not strictly about moral questions relative to acting, but relative to life as a whole, that form the foundations.

This, I think, is what John speaks of when he has Jesus say, "I'm the vine, you're the branches." It's a thousand miles away from any sense of need to stay in contact with a particular language about Jesus in order to be in contact with Jesus. The names of the Spirit and its movements are as different as the kinds of human cultures. God does not leave himself without witness anywhere. It may be pretty dim sometimes and hard to recognize, but he goes places we can't. In his love, no one, not even the eunuch who, and this is one of the points to the story, had been to worship in Jerusalem, but could not go to the interior of the temple, is tossed aside. He cannot go there because he is an imperfect human specimen. So God comes to meet him. He does not go to meet God, God meets him on the road back home. Irony on irony, they do not meet where worship (divine-human meeting) is supposed to take place because he is excluded from there, but God meets him on the road back home, in a place, and the author makes a point of this, unsuited for human settlement. That's why the road is a wilderness one. It is the last place in the world in which one would expect to discover a community illuminative and expressive of God. And yet that, rather than in the temple, is where it happened.

Our temple, what we're doing this morning acting as church, is not, in fact, where we are to meet God. Oh, meet him here if you can. It's a good idea and I'm all for it. But, what we do here is remind ourselves of the meetings that take place elsewhere: of the meetings that take place in the casual conversation of a supermarket aisle, in life with our families, in how we treat the growing, 5 PM, mini-traffic jam that takes place when trying to get over the Willamette Bridge. These are the places where the meeting with God happens, where the branches need nourishment from the vine. It is the presence of God in these places of which the symbolic presence of God here in Eucharist is supposed to remind us and lead us into an awareness and consideration of the presence of the holy in the secular, of the divine in the ordinary, of God in the world.

So, meet God here in church, but if you meet him here, remember that this meeting is intended to throw the light of his presence into all other aspects of your life so that he is met, known, loved and sought wherever you are, whenever you are and with whomever you are.

That's enough of that.