

11-12-17 – Branchings of the Vine – John 15.1-5 - Rev. Mike Eggleston at St Benedict's Episcopal

We're celebrating Ecumenical Sunday and 500 years of the Protestant Reformation today. So, as your friendly local retired Methodist preacher who loves history, I'll start by remembering events in Europe 500 years ago. We're in autumn of 1517. Europe was on the verge of ever-accelerating changes. The printing press had been invented in Europe and by 1517 there were hundreds of towns that had presses. So literacy and learning were spreading. Another exploding technology was gunpowder, firearms, and artillery. Improved sea-going ships and firearms meant that a New World had been reached by Europeans 25 years earlier, and the wealth of the Americas was starting to flow into Europe. Seagoing trade missions to China were also opening in 1517. On the religious front, western and southern Europe were Roman Catholic, and between 20-40% of the land was held by the Catholic Church. But change was in the air. William Tyndale had made an English translation of the Bible 150 years earlier. It was suppressed, and the church later exhumed his body and burned it. In Bohemia, now the Czech Republic, a religious reformer named Jan Hus had preached and translated too. Hus had been burned at the stake for his efforts, but in 1519 Bohemia still probably had a majority proto-Protestant population. Speaking of population, Europe as a whole was on the upswing. It had maybe only 2/3 of the people that it held 200 years earlier, but the bubonic plagues were over and population was rebounding. Europe was still mostly rural. Maybe only Constantinople, Paris, and Venice held over 100,000 people. But towns of over 10,000 people, especially seaports and trade centers, were growing everywhere.

Then on the last day of October, 1517, a learned Augustinian monk and university lecturer named Martin Luther either nailed to the door of the Wittenberg Church, or mailed to his archbishop, 95 theses challenging practices of the Catholic Church. At first he mostly wanted to challenge the church's selling of indulgences, tickets to shorten one's time in purgatory and hasten one's way into heaven after death, and Luther also protested simony, the selling of religious offices. But the printing presses soon circulated thousands of copies of Luther's theses and the lid was off for protesting Catholic authority. Meanwhile a gifted priest and preacher in Zurich, Ulrich Zwingli, was proclaiming much the same message as Luther, centering on scriptural authority over church authority and the primacy of faith over religious rituals. The Swiss cantons were choosing up sides between Catholics and Protestants like Zwingli. Meanwhile in France Jean Calvin was only 9 years old in 1517. But he was a prodigy and already in university at age 12. Before he was 30 Calvin had moved to Switzerland and to Protestant Christianity, and he had written the Institutes of Christian Religion, a systematic theology for Reformed churches.

Meanwhile in the Netherlands the famous scholar Erasmus, was making a translation of the Latin Bible into Greek, which opened up a path for protesting Christians to access the New Testament in its original language rather than have to go through the Latin translation. Erasmus would not take sides between Catholics and Protestants. His passion was education and his hope was for reasoned discourse. Meanwhile several fiery preachers in Germany, including Thomas Muntzer, were not so interested in civil discourse as they were in the overthrow of feudal and Catholic society. They launched armed militias, and perhaps 100,000 people died violently in what history calls the Peasant's Rebellion. Meanwhile, what was happening in England in 1517 was that a young and energetic king, Henry VIII, was still allied with the Catholic Church but not eternally married to it. He

needed a male heir. His Catholic wife Queen Catherine did not bear one. So England was watching the religious ferment in Europe. Where Protestants of many persuasions were busting out all over

My sermon title is "Branchings of the Vine." To move this along quickly, the Lutheran branch of Christianity soon became dominant in northern Europe. Sweden declared its church to be free of Rome in 1524, and adopted Lutheranism. By 1549 after several wars, the Peace of Augsburg allowed rulers in the Holy Roman Empire to choose whether their lands would be Catholic or Protestant. Northern Germany went Lutheran. Meanwhile, the Calvinist or reformed branches of Christianity was on the losing sides of wars in France but took over more peacefully in Scotland, the Dutch Netherlands, and later in most of New England. In England, the British Parliament passed the Act of Supremacy in 1534, making the Anglican Church free of Rome. Anglicanism and its child Methodism have often thought of themselves as steering a middle way, a *Via Media*, between Protestant and Catholic. While what is called the radical wing of the Reformation gave rise to more branches of Christianity, among them Amish, Mennonites, Quakers, and Baptists, and many more.

Before moving on I do want to touch on the major changes that came into the world with the Protestant Reformation. In theological matters, the Protestant churches almost all have had three common beliefs: *solus Christus*, *sola scriptura*, and *sola fide*. That is to say that Christ only is the head of the church and our savior, and we are justified or made right with God only by faith through God's grace, and that scripture is our only or highest authority, though Anglicans and Methodists and Pentecostals have a more nuanced view of that. But perhaps the greatest effects of the Protestant Reformation are not just in theology but in the ways people think and act in culture. There is no doubt that Protestantism came to the world alongside greater literacy and learning, with enhanced education for both men and women. There is little doubt that Protestantism coincided with the growth of capitalism. What was called the Protestant ethic emphasized hard work and saving. As John Wesley later preached, earn all you can, save all you can, give all you can. It's likely also that the Protestant Reformation brought with it a hunger for freedom and liberty of all kinds. Protestants from the get-go questioned authority. On a more negative note, Protestantism did a lot to end any unity in Christianity. Religious wars attended its birth, and many say that the Protestant Reformation only ended with the close of the 30-year war in 1648, which war killed a third of the people in central Europe. Also to some unmeasurable degree the Protestant Reformation has increased individualism, people thinking and for themselves, but has maybe reduced awareness of community, and serving a common good. I don't know whether Erasmus, or Luther, would be more enthralled or appalled by what they set in motion.

But our lesson scripture today suggests a generous way of looking at the flowering of Protestantism. Often when people try to chart the spread of church denominations they'll use a tree chart, like this one. Some may more scientifically show a clad chart, straight lines branching from other straight lines, Methodists from Anglicans, Nazarenes from Methodists, and so on. But nature I think abhors a straight line. In John 15 Jesus gives us a different visual which may be closer to reality. I am the vine, you are the branches, said Jesus. Well, to prepare for this sermon in part, I went into my back yard and eyeballed some vines that I planted three or four years ago that have done all right. Grape vine, honeysuckle, and berries. Bougainvillea would fit the bill too, but I pulled them out years ago because they used to attack me or at least defend themselves violently. All these vines are a

little hard to sort out. They grow every which way. Where is the honeysuckle's main root? I guess that's it somewhere down there in that mass of foliage. But which is the main trunk? Well, that one, maybe, which winds that way and then hangs a left, but maybe the main trunk is that one which intertwines for a while and then enters that tangled kite string area. It was kind of enjoyable pulling on the canopy here and there and trying to figure which shoot connects with which branch down below. Maybe the only way I'd know for sure what connects to what is by cutting off branches near the base but I don't want to do that, because the complexity of the whole is quite beautiful and amazing. I only really prune these vines much when they've grown too far into my neighbor's yard, which they're prone to do. So is the ivy. Where does it start and end?

What is even more pleasing about these vines is that for once my backyard study agrees with my book study, matching what the New Interpreter's Bible commentary says about the vine in John 15. It says, I quote, "it is helpful to visualize what the branches of a vine actually look like. In a vine, branches are almost completely inextinguishable from one another. It is impossible to determine where one branch stops and another branch starts. All run together as they grow out of the central vine. What this vine image suggests about community, then, is that there are no free-standing individuals in community, but branches who encircle one another completely." So says the New Interpreter's Bible commentary on the vine and the branches.

Hmm. Are the branches of the Christian denominations a lot like the intertwined shoots and tendrils of the honeysuckle or wisteria or passion vine? No, no, probably not. When Jesus compared himself to the vine he was probably only talking about grapevines, carefully shaped by vinedressers. And when he talked about branches, why, he was talking about individual Christians being the branches of course, he wasn't talking about whole denominations as branches of Christ. Or was he? When he calls himself the vine the Greek word there is *ampelos*, and it normally means the whole plant, roots, shoots, and all. But the word for branch is *klema* or *klemata* and it's unspecified who Jesus counts as branches. Are the branches just individuals, Peter, Mary, Mike, and Alice? Or are his branches households or house churches? Or are his branches the churches in places like Corinth or Los Oso? Or could the branches be denominations, Catholic or Episcopalian or Divine Fire of Pentecostal Holiness. Hmm. Christ doesn't specify just who or what his branches are. He only says that the branches must bear fruit, and that the branches must abide in his love, that's in chapter 15, verses 9 and 10 and 12.

So I went out again to the backyard to ask a couple of questions of the grapevine and berry vines. They know I'm hard of hearing and don't listen well and hardly know their language at all, but they're plants, they're gracious and they can't really walk away from my three questions. So I asked them, do you abide in the love of your vine? They said, "you know we do." We love it all, our roots in the soil and our leaves in the sun and rain and wind and our tendrils giving us holdfasts to climb. We abide in the vine and we love it." So I asked a second question, "Will you bear fruit?" They say yes, and you could have some, but we'd bear fruit more if you learned to prune us properly and protect us from the mites and molds and fungus." Then it was their answer to a third question which touched me right in the churchy part of me. I asked, "what do you feel about the other branches and shoots on the vine?" And they said, "Huh? What's that, other branches and shoots?" So I tried to clarify, "Well, for example, you're over here, growing this direction. How do you feel about the other

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branches, going that way, and that way?" And they said, "What other branches, Mike? They're all us. There's no us and them in the vine." And I went away thinking, but there is sure is us and them among humans, and Christians.

So. Can we get past our isolated thinking, that thinks that Presbyterians and prosperity preachers and Baptists and Evangelicals and God forbid Red State fundamentalists are not part of us and we not part of them? The theologian who's coming to St Benedicts in three weeks, Matthew Fox, thinks we can get and must get past our separations. Many of you will come hear him. Some of you are already part of a weekly Hollister Study on one of his books, "The Coming of the Cosmic Christ." All of us are surrounded right now by sixteen works of art partly inspired by Fox called the Stations of the Cosmic Christ. Spend some time reflecting on these. For Matthew Fox, the Cosmic Christ is the Christ-nature within ourselves and throughout all the universes. When Fox tries to articulate more who the Cosmic Christ is, he writes that it is the pattern that connects in all things, and the bearer of coherence in all things. Fox keeps returning to that word "connect." The Cosmic Christ is the connector of time and space, of microcosm and macrocosm, of crucifixion and resurrection, he says. So look on these stations of the Cosmic Christ. Look on the vines in your neighborhoods, for the vines have much to teach us about Christ and one another. "I am the vine, you are the branches, abide in me" said Jesus. When we built the present configuration of Trinity United Methodist where I was pastor at that time, we had those words with a grapevine etched and painted on the windows of the front door at Trinity, where they remain. For "I am the vine, you are the branches, abide in me" is one of the most powerful teachings of the Cosmic Christ. Thank you God, Amen.