

“I Am the Real Vine.”

I. Jesus' Farewell Discourse

- A. Every year for the 5th & 6th Sundays of the Easter Season, the gospel readings are devoted to what is called the “*Farewell Discourse*” in the Gospel of John, chapters 14, 15 & 16.
1. These chapters are the centerpiece of five chapters following the account of the farewell meal in ch. 13 and before the High Priestly Prayer in ch. 17. All together these chapters make up about 1/3 of John's Gospel.
 2. Their importance is rooted in two crises that consumed the early church in the years and decades after Jesus' death and resurrection.
 - a. The first, what is the meaning of Jesus' death on a cross?
 - b. And second, the absence of Jesus from his followers when they expected the immanent coming of God's Kingdom.
 - (1. What kind of relationship can they/we now have with the crucified and risen Jesus?
 3. Scholars tell us that it is the pastoral genius of the Fourth Evangelist to pull together a combination of once distinct traditions and position this unit as a Farewell Discourse to be Jesus' response to those crises.
 - a. So if you wonder why we are hearing of Jesus' words spoken in John's telling the evening before his crucifixion, when we are celebrating the resurrection this Easter season,
 - b. it's because these are the first reflections arising from the post-Easter church but given authority in Jesus own words about what all these events mean, and how do we move forward as followers of Jesus.
 4. A review of Church history shows these questions have been with the church ever since.
 - a. We see emerging responses from the very beginning in the first and second lesson today.
 - b. What we see is that understandings at one time and place do not define reality once and for all, but become a creative force for new understandings emerging in other times and places.
 - c. Certainly these same questions are pressing in Christian theology for our own time as we wonder how does our faith speak to new crises today on a global scale.

- B. We hear from other Easter traditions in the first two lessons.
 - 1. Through these seven weeks we read Luke's narrative of the early days of the church in the Book of Acts.
 - 2. This year in the Lectionary cycle, Year B, we read from the Epistle of 1 John which represents how the earlier tradition of John was adapted at a later period at the end of the 1st century.
- C. So this morning we listen. -- How can we hear the guidance of the Holy Spirit speaking to us and our world out of our traditions, for our own age?

II. "I Am the Real Vine."

- A. In John 15 we hear Jesus' final "*I am*" saying, -- "*I am the true vine.*"
 - 1. His parting words are meant to give his friends strength for the days after his death.
 - 2. Exploring the metaphor of the vine we know that in a vineyard, the best grapes are produced closest to the central vine.
 - a. That is where the nutrients are most concentrated.
 - b. So, the lateral branches are not allowed to ramble all over the arbor.
 - c. They are pruned and kept short.
 - 3. The metaphor from nature points to the life of discipleship.
 - a. When Jesus says, "*I am the true vine,*"
 - (1. the word '*true*' could also be translated '*real*' or '*authentic*.'
 - (2. The key to bearing fruit is being a branch of the '*real*' vine.
 - b. God is the grower.
 - (1. Bearing fruit hinges on the work of a gardener who tends the vines.
 - c. We are the branches.
 - (1. The gardener prunes and cleanses the branches/disciples that are attached to the real vine.
 - (2. The purpose is so those branches will bear fruit.
 - d. Through this image, two aspects of creation are held together,
 - (1. being pruned – and - bearing fruit.
 - (2. And it seems the order here is important.
 - 4. As I look back on my own journey of faith it seems fair to say that times of struggle and loss are the times that have engaged me most deeply in my life of faith. You could call those "*times of pruning.*"
 - a. I know others who have made a different response, to abandon their faith, either in the outright profession or in practice.

- b. I can't say what the difference is objectively between myself and someone else.
 - c. But I can say that for me, having a sense of relationship with the divine (*however we may describe it*) in an "I-Thou" kind of way, "*subject to subject*" is basic for my being.
 - (1. Of course this is a relationship that has to be nurtured.
 - d. And I know too that if one's relationship with the divine is best described as the "*subject-object*" sort that you have in institutional roles, or rationalistic systems of theology, that can go out the window very easily in troubled times.
 - e. Or a relationship can just die by being ignored.
5. So I think a good way to describe being connected to the real vine is an experience of being connected "*subject to subject.*"
- a. We certainly know what that is like in our relationships with loved ones, friends, even our pets.
 - b. There are other vines too but they will let you down.
 - c. And perhaps one of our biggest problems is reducing real "*subjects*" to "*objects.*"
 - (1. I.E. "*objectifying*" something that is living into something simply as a means for my own ends, an inert, passive object,
 - (2. whether that be other people,\ the natural world,\ or the living Christ.
- B. For modern people in Western society the greatest challenge of this metaphor may be our self concept.
1. Since Enlightenment times, Western society has steadily promoted independence and strong individuality as a way to make something of yourself.
 - a. We imagine ourselves as sovereign individuals.
 - b. We consider our self-worth as dependent on our own success and what we can produce with our own resources as we attempt to solve problems and meet challenges.
 - (1. It's basic even to our economic system.
 - c. All this is deeply ingrained in us and it is hard to imagine a different way of living that transcends our self made ego.-----
 2. Another difficulty is our attachment to things,\ our wealth.
 - a. A materialistic way of life insulates one from our neighbor,\ from the poor,\ from the larger community,\ especially the suffering of the world.
 - b. This is simply a pervasive characteristic of the world in which we live,\ no less so for self professing Christians.

c. So, the need for pruning, if we are to produce good fruit.

C. The metaphor of the vine says, I am not created to live to myself or by means of myself.

1. I am incomplete without the grace of others and without the grace of God who comes to me in Jesus Christ.
2. In our ever widening understandings of the natural world we can also say, I am incomplete when I fail to recognize my connections to the created world.
 - a. The world around us is the very context from which we have come, -- we believe as the very creation of God.
 - b. If I live oblivious or in denial about where my life comes from, certainly I will wither away spiritually.
 - c. Without the bond between God and all of God's creation and my humanity, this humanity loses the capacity to be creative.
3. Jesus' parable pictures a living and growing community of faith, a place of productivity and increase.
 - a. The fruit we produce is for the good of the whole.
 - b. Our fruit is not only for our private good.
 - c. The fruit of the vine belong to the farmer; they are God's.
 - d. The fruit is the product that God intended to produce in the very planting and tending of the vine.
4. Jesus counsels and prays with his disciples inviting them to stay close to him, place their trust in him. He will be present to them.
 - a. He warns them they cannot go it alone.
 - b. On their own they would be cut off from their life source.
 - (1. They would bear no fruit.
 - c. If we could hear this today it would be a way forward.

III. Bearing the Fruit of Love

A. So, the parable is ultimately about divine providence and the goodness of creation when it acknowledges its dependence on the Creator.

1. This metaphor, \ parable of the Vine reminds us who we are in the scheme of things framed by Jesus command of a self-giving love.
2. As we have received of God's providence, a share in the goodness of creation, --
 - a. Jesus tells his friends, so "*you bear much fruit and become my disciples.*" In this God is glorified. /

3. The starting point is always Jesus' admonition, "*Abide in me as I abide in you.*"
 - b. Christ is in you and you are in Christ - is the way St. Paul puts it.
4. The Christian life begins in love, and is carried out in love.
 - a. The love command "*that you love one another as I have loved you*" is the imperative moment of Christ's teaching that prevents us as the Church from being an inward turned and self-contained reality.
 - b. This is where we take up the Farewell Discourse next Sunday.