

I am the Vine, You are the Branches

John 15:1-8; 1 John 4:7-21

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The 5th Sunday of Easter

Jesus' metaphor of the vine and the branches challenges our contemporary notion of self-identity. Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber expresses this challenge nicely in her reflection on today's Gospel lesson. She writes:

I'm nothing if not independent. Reportedly my first sentence was "do it self!" Yes, I will do it myself, thank you. See I want choices. And I want independence.... What I wish Jesus said is: "I am whatever you want me to be. And you can be whatever you want to be: vine, pruner, branch, soil...knock yourself out." What Jesus actually said is: "I am the vine. My Father is the vine grower. You are the branches. Dang. The casting has already been finalized. Vines, and branches off of vines, are all tangled and messy and it's just too hard to know what is what... Not only are we dependent on Jesus, but our lives are uncomfortably tangled up together. The Christian life is a vine-y, branch-y, jumbled mess of us and Jesus and others. Christianity is a lousy religion for the "do it self!" set.¹

Christianity is a lousy religion for the "do it self" set. Nowhere does Jesus teach more clearly that we are not independent do-it-yourself-ers. Nowhere does Jesus demonstrate more clearly that we cannot go it alone, that we cannot pull ourselves up by our bootstraps when life puts us down, and that it is completely unreasonable to expect anyone else to either.

Let's take a look at some grapevines. This first image is of a wild grapevine growing around an



old fence. We can see what Pastor Nadia means when she says that vines and branches are all tangled and messy, and it's just too hard to know what is what. Once in a while our lives probably look like this. Maybe our families feel like this occasionally. Maybe the places we work or study or play are a lot like this. A vine-y, branch-y, jumbled mess. Is that an accurate description of your life, or some part of it?

¹ Nadia Bolz-Weber, "Vines and Branches —I Want to be a Sunflower for Jesus" available at <http://thq.wearesparkhouse.org/yearb/easter5gospe/>



This is a picture of a cultivated grapevine. The vine grower has put in a metal rod to anchor the main vine in place. The individual branches have been sorted out, trained and disciplined. They rest on a wire structure that supports them from below and from above. All the dead branches, all the non-productive branches, and anything else that doesn't contribute to healthy growth has been removed.



Grape vines and branches that have been cultivated end up producing masses of grapes. They look quite different from that wild grapevine growing around that old fence. This is what God wants for us. This is God's desire and promise for each one of us, for this community of faith, for all people everywhere. This is what God will do with us if we are willing. This is what God is already doing with us if we have the eyes to see it.

The image of the vine and branches shows us that Christ is the source of all life, the one through whom all things have come into being (John 1:3). Our very existence is dependent on God, who nurtures and cultivates us. We are not and cannot be the vine that gives life to all. Neither are we the vine grower, the one who cultivates, stakes, supports and yes, prunes the branches, even though all too often we act like we have the knowledge and right to hack at the branches around us.

We are not the vine, we are not the vine grower, we are branches to whom God has given a choice. We can choose to abide in Christ, or, we can choose not to abide in Christ. Jesus tells us what is at stake in making that choice: just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me... Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit (John 15:4-5).

To abide is all about remaining, staying, tarrying somewhere, taking up residence, making one's self at home. Jesus teaches us that there are many abiding places — many places to be at home — in God's house, that in fact he is preparing a special abiding place for each one of us (John 14:2). Jesus teaches us that in choosing to abide in him, we are giving him and God space to make themselves at home in us (John 14:23). In our New Testament lesson for today we hear that those who abide in love are the ones who are abiding in God, and in whom God abides (1 John 4:16).

Which gets us back to bearing fruit. God is love, proclaims the author of 1 John. God revealed that love to us by sending God's only beloved Son into the world so that we might live through

him (1 John 4:9). When we live through Christ, when we abide in him, love is perfected in our lives. When we abide in Christ, love grows in us, casting out fear and hatred, empowering us to act boldly.

Abiding in Christ means admitting that we are not independent, do-it-yourself-ers who can boast “I did it my way.” Abiding in Christ means accepting that we are dependent on Christ and on each other. It means graciously receiving the support Christ offers us, most often through the caring of our brothers and sisters. It means consenting to being pruned: to letting go of the things that hinder our growth in love, things like fear and hatred, greed and jealousy, grudges and resentment, shame and guilt, and all the other vine-y, branch-y tangly things that mess us up. Abiding in Christ is not always comfortable or easy. But abiding in Christ is always about belonging. Abiding in Christ is always an affirmation of our capacity to make a positive difference in the world around us, if we so choose.

On Thursday evening the council began a process of strategic planning. You will be hearing more about that plan as it develops. What I want to lift up this morning comes from the survey that some of you filled out. When asked about the strengths of this congregation, a very strong majority of responses clustered around three things (1) being welcoming and open to all people without exception, (2) being family and children oriented, and (3) hospitality. All of these things are connected with abiding, with a sense of having found a home, of belonging. When asked to identify one opportunity for growth, the overwhelming response was outreach and service. In other words, you want to make a difference in this neighborhood and in this community, you want to bear fruit by sharing Christ’s love with others. And you do in so many ways too numerous for me to list here this morning. Our mission to know, love and share Christ is grounded in a deep sense of belonging, of having found a home where Christ is present.

This month we will be exploring two ways that we can make a difference for children and families here in Cedar Rapids. In this community, some children do not have permanent homes in which to abide, some children do not feel like they belong. In this community, some children do not have secure sources of food and nourishment, some children will go hungry on this Lord’s Day. So this Sunday and next we invite you to join us during the education hour to learn more about foster children and foster families, through Families Helping Families and Iowa KidsNet. After the second service today, Greg Goodell will be here to answer questions and help us organize a team to participate in HACAP’s BackPack Program.

Please pray with me: O Lord Christ, you are the vine and we are the branches. Help us abide so firmly in you, that we will be emboldened to tell all we meet that they belong to you and are loved by you. In our holy name we pray. Amen.