

John 15:1-8          Jesus the True Vine

‘I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. 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. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

God is love ...love is God.

This statement is from the reading from the First Book of John.

Everything that God does is an act of love.

Every act of love is an act of God.

To know God is to love, to live and act in love is to know God.

It’s simple, when you think about it. It surrounds all.

This text reminds us that love is always a gift;

it can’t be earned or handed out.

You can’t be loved by God for a bit, or for a certain amount of time. Love is universal. We know this is true because this is the love we experience from those who know God. We know some of these people; love just seems to pour out of them. They don’t even seem to do anything, it just is. That’s how God’s love is.

In our second reading from the Gospel of John, Jesus offers the disciples a radical proposal; together with him, they are a new body.

All through Jesus’ ministry he breaks through cultural, religious, and gender barriers through his teaching. In this reading, he tells his friends the vine and branches are made of the same substance –they are all “vine.” Jesus tell the disciples, and us, that we are all part of him, organically, and intimately connected with his purpose and life in God.

In this Gospel, where Jesus is understood as being the same as God and as coming from God, the back and forth of the vine and the branches takes on a new importance. Earlier in the writing Jesus claims that he has direct communication with God. This same connection Jesus is now offering his followers. Because of their close ties with Jesus they are connected with God, and God will hear and act when they call.

But what about the grape branches themselves?

It requires tough pruning decisions, a willingness to wound and amputate limbs of the vine in order to encourage it to 'shape' into better vines and fruit.

God knows what a growing season can bring- not only wind, rain and sun, but also snow, frost, pests, weeds, mildew and the sharpest of gardening shears -but still the branches produce fruit.

If you have been to the Okanagan in the past number of years, you may have noticed many of the fruit tree orchards (apple, cherry, peach, apricots) have been replaced with vineyards and wineries.

Is there more money in a case of wine...or a basket of peaches?

Davis Delany wonders just how delicate the grape branches, leaves and fruit are when even a slight change in the weather can actually affect whether fruit gets produced or not.

He wonders if Jesus might have had this in mind when he compared us to grapevine branches? Are we really that exposed to being robbed of abundant life because of the changing conditions around us?

For most of us, our faith is in good shape when we're in good shape.

We're pretty happy when we're living and working in ideal conditions, when we have a loving and gracious family and friends who care for us, and a fulfilling and supportive faith community with many opportunities to serve.

Who wouldn't thrive in such an environment? But, if the conditions should change, are we heading toward poor spiritual health? Can we still bear good fruit?

"He is the vine and we are the branches"...a very beautiful and powerful image.

But something we do understand is that we're not like grape branches or leaves- we can Detach ourselves from the vine anytime we want to.

And we can Attach ourselves to something else if we want to.

Something we think will provide a better home. Something shiny and new.

Jesus warned his followers to "...stay with him..abide in him."

In other words, don't get caught up in things of the sparkly world out there.

Abide is a word we don't hear much these days. You won't see a motel sign that says; *"Abide With Us" = Wi-fi, air conditioning, free parking, Kitchenette extra*

I was thinking about the word 'abide', (meaning 'stay.')

The Message bible suggests a phrase like, "make yourself at home in my love." The word 'home' caught my attention. 'Home' right away gives a positive image....warm, cozy, safe, wear what you want, eat when you want, watch what you want on TV.

But what about those who have an unhealthy home....violence or abuse?  
What about those who have no home? What does abide mean for them?

As much as a home is a place of shelter of safety, of family...is this the 'abiding' Jesus talks about? Is this the vine speaking to the branches?

It's in abiding that we discover the truth,  
It's in abiding that we come to know.

Regan Sutterfield says knowledge and belief work on so many levels beyond our intentional and rational minds. It's through practice, community and imitation that we come to truth. We find all of this in abiding, staying close....not letting go. A part of this, Jesus tells us, is also submitting to the Pruner's shears, allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, humiliated and reworked so new growth can come. (Submitting...a word I need to spend time reflecting on.)

Then I was thinking about those of us who are differently abled. Maybe there are those of us who are missing limbs- from birth, an accident or illness...maybe we are blind or deaf. What did the great gardener have in mind when these children of his family were created with such differences. What fruit were they intended to bear?

Does this mean those who have suffered unbelievable pain and torment in their lives have finally left themselves open to whatever comes next?

Is this the same as being vulnerable to the Pruner's shears?

Does this mean they are ready for new growth?

And does someone who has had a relatively 'charmed life,' as the saying goes, are they equally as vulnerable, are they the wounded and humiliated ?

And do they want to be?

And for that matter, each one of us must be willing to be disfigured in order to be healed and transformed. We must allow ourselves to be vulnerable to the Pruner's shears. If it sounds painful – it is.

It's in these most inner, vulnerable moments we are truly close to God, in these moments of Holy Disfigurement, we abide/stay in Jesus. These moments are the deepest and rarest, and they do not come often...we have to be ready.

There are many beautiful images of a grape-vine;

\*sunlight filtered through delicate green leaves,

\*grapes -sweet and juicy,

\*an arbor providing quiet shade on a hot summer day

\*rows of vines on straight, wooden fences.

\*the sweetest wine, tantalizing to taste

But an image not often thought about is the unstoppable growth. With warm water a small, tight bud of a leaf is sticking out of the side of a weathered, 100 year old vine. The leaves can't stop growing, even if they wanted to. They may not amount to much, they may not even produce fruit at all, but something in the vine pushes the leaves out into the world.

These leaves may be small, misshapen, fruitless, but they are part of the vine; they are the vine. God sustains even the smallest, weakest parts. Nutrients somehow make it through the withered, old, grey vine to the fragile and vulnerable leaves. It's in these small, tender, vulnerable leaves that God is. And we can abide there, too.

In these moments of painful pruning there is redemption, there is love.  
In that moment of oneness there is love.

And who knows whether we're growing, or dying, or both?

Only the owner of the vineyard.

Are we a weed that only looks like a vine, or are we the real thing?

Only our fruit will tell.

And how do we bear fruit? By dying.

A very Easter message.

Let us pray: Thank you for being our Vine,

you let us crawl all over you,

and you carefully prune us.

We don't think we want to be connected to you,

yet you cause our tiny leaves to bud. Amen.