

TANGLED UP IN GOD

1 JOHN 4:20-21; JOHN 15:1-8

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NEW TESTAMENT LETTER 1 John 4: 20-21

Those who say, "I love God," and hate their sisters or brothers, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from God is this: those who love God must love their sisters and brothers also.

GOSPEL READING John 15:1-8

I am the true vine, and my Father-Mother is the vinegrower. God removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit God 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-Mother is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

When you drive through my home region in Germany, you see vineyards everywhere. The Romans brought their vine stock to the region in the first century AD. Most vineyards are located along very steep hills which line the picturesque meandering Mosel river. While there are some larger regional growers, it is still quite common that families own smaller parcels and carefully cultivate them. Of course, the most coveted parcels are the ones which benefit from the most exposure to sunlight. The sun warms the crushed slate rock at the base of the vine known to preserve the warmth in the soil. So much of the quality of a vintage also depends on the temperatures and level of moisture which varies from year to year. Vineyards are part of a complex interrelated eco-system.

Some of the vine stock where I come from is hundreds of years old and keeps growing more shoots and branches. The vintner has to carefully tend to the proliferation of the branches. On average, every vine is pruned eighteen times in the course of a single year to maximize the strength of the vine as well as the quality of the fruit. Vintners know the

paradox of “less is more” as the energy of the plant is focused and supported. It takes time and precision to monitor the well-being of the soil, vines, branches, and the sweet Riesling grapes which will yield new wine in time. Then comes the fun part of celebrating the fruits of this labor!

Vineyards feature prominently in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures.¹ Vineyards, vines, branches, fruit – these are all potent metaphors for God’s vision of how we shape Christian life in community which always includes challenges and lots of potential. In John’s Gospel, Jesus describes himself as the vine and us as the branches who are meant to bear fruit.² He is giving his disciples and future community an image to understand their shared relationship, what leads to bearing much fruit and what does not.

Jesus says, *“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 (John 15:4).”* To “abide” can mean *to remain, to hold onto, to reside in, and to wait patiently.* To draw the nutrients needed to bear fruit, we have to somehow remain connected with Jesus Christ. He offers the life blood needed, so to speak, the love and vision which nourishes life in us and gives us focus. His love has been shaped and tempered in the fire of death and resurrection, struggle, and reemergence, endings, and new beginnings.

It is no wonder then that Jesus also works with the metaphor of pruning as an integral part of our ongoing collective and individual growth and transformation. God is described as the expert vine grower who knows how to treat this whole organism so that it can bear fruit most effectively. Like a good vintner, God will not hold back from cutting off what is not able to grow well or has run its course in order to make the whole plant grow stronger and bear fruit more abundantly. Such pruning means making decisions and it can feel like

¹ Isaiah 5:1-7; Matthew 21:28-32; Luke 13:6-9; Luke 20:9-18 to name just a few.

² Jesus was probably referring to *Vitis Vinifera*, the common grape vine native to the Middle East and used for the production of wine.

dying. As Easter people, we also know that death can be the gateway to new life. Along the way, we may need to take time to grieve and honor what has been.

Pruning applies to our life in numerous ways on a personal and communal level as people of faith. We have probably all seen trees and bushes and vines that have branches growing all over the place but cannot bear fruit because the energy is getting too dispersed. Maybe we have gotten so overextended in our personal commitments that we don't feel we can tend to any of them with the quality of presence and commitment we aspire to. I bet a lot of us know what that feels like. The very letting go of one thing may allow for deepening and greater fruit bearing in another context close to our hearts.³

We may also think of an experience where our priorities have become misdirected. Maybe we have become so focused on work or a particular project that we have neglected to cultivate our relationships with our loved ones or our fellow church member. We may need to nurture the soil of love and connection again, knowing that love is never lived in the abstract but in the particular. I say this also knowing full well that many people in our society have to work multiple jobs just to make ends meet while trying to tend to loved ones as well. Their plight is also our concern. Elizabeth has reminded us of the importance of reaching out to others using the love language they will be able to hear. For one it may be a lovely meal prepared for them. Our child or grandchild may need us on the sidelines of their soccer game or at their concert. Maybe it is time for a cup of coffee with the committee member after stepping on each other's toes. These are the particular ways in which we learn to abide in love.⁴

³ Perhaps we have channeled our energy down a path which does not yield life. Ask anyone struggling overtly with an addiction and you know that some behaviors are not fruitful for dealing with the very real wounds and burdens we carry. The truth of the matter is that we all have patterns for self-regulating our emotions and needs that could benefit from divine pruning. God is ready to help us with that as well.

⁴ Some of us may relate to a sense of sometimes getting trapped in anxious or unproductive thoughts and behaviors that take on an unwieldy life of their own.

On a communal level, the themes of pruning and cultivating apply in numerous ways. That is also why healthy congregations engage in visioning processes on a regular basis. We began this work over a year ago and are now beginning to implement some of our goals. One of them is a commitment to reevaluate our ministries on a regular basis. This is our process of assessing what must be pruned, what needs to be strengthened, changed, combined or ended. We do this holy work because we want to make sure all that we do remains closely connected to the vine of Christ's love and vision for us.

The new *Cake & Community* program has been a great example of taking a familiar ministry concept of providing hospitality and fellowship to members of the community and giving it a new shape. We could no longer sustain our much beloved and once highly successful *Soup Lunch*. It took thoughtful conversation to discern all that, to celebrate what has been good and move on. While we have had to let something dear to us die, so to speak, a new branch emerged, grew strong, and bore fruit.

This church, like every other, has to keep our ministries close enough to the vine of our own church life to make sure they can thrive in an integrated way. Interestingly, vines cannot stand up by themselves but benefit from getting intertwined and leaning on something for support. This strikes me as an apt metaphor for our current exploration of whether we can intertwine these important ministries: Heavenly Threads which currently sells quality used clothing and generates funds that can be used to address needs in our community, SOS – *Share Our Surplus* – which currently passes goods on to members in the community free of charge, and the Shields Mission Project which provides direct assistance to families and individuals in need on a referral basis. All these ministries also build connection.

We are trying to figure out how we can combine what is best about all of them in a targeted way. We are trying to sort out how to make this ministry model most *inclusive* beyond an individual's financial means and how to let the spirit *inspire* and guide us to connect the dots between what one person or family needs and another is able to give. We are also

hoping to *involve* volunteers and community partner agencies in making all this thrive beyond what we might even yet be able to imagine. We have researched similar organizations for best practices, spoken with stakeholders, and are now entering another phase of asking questions, gathering input, listening, processing, and reshaping a proposal. All this is part of doing the work of pruning, cultivating, and preparing the soil for our next phase of serving our community.

At our congregational meeting following the service today, we will consider adopting these core values of being *inclusive, inspired and involved* as signposts for our life together. They will be the touchstones of how we understand our ministries as well as any new ministry model we will adopt. Today, we will also consider adopting a *Covenant of Right Relationship* so we can positively and proactively state our aspirations and intentions of how we hope to treat each other. Creating such a covenant was part of our visioning process from the beginning. It can serve as another touchstone which points us back to the vine of Jesus' vision, love, and forgiving grace.

As the First Letter of John reminds us, we are called to do whatever we do in a spirit of love, not hate. It is natural that we do not always understand each other's intentions or needs. We often do not know enough about each other's stories to understand why and how we are triggered. By stating positively to each other what we are willing to do to stay connected and grow in love, we deliberately say we want to lean on the vine, on Christ's love to sustain us. This will mean that we will not always agree but we can refuse to reduce each other to a single dimension when we are complex beings. We may even have to say some *sacred no's* to each other as Jesus sometimes did. Even when we cannot resolve things, we can grieve and wish each other well. We can also be surprised by the strong bonds that can evolve from sharing with each other in a vulnerable way. God's grace is sufficient for all of us. God's love is strong enough for all of us. We are all tangled up in God who will use us to bear fruit in the world. May we seek the sun of God's amazing love to grow and change in the ways we need to. God is not done with us yet. Thanks be to God.