

Di Vine and Da Branches John 15:1-8 Rev. Brian Bagley-Bonner

I am planning to grow Sweet Potatos this summer. I did not know until recently that the usual procedure is to root a sweet potato in water in February, cut the growths from the top, root them and then plant these “slips” as they are called when they are 6 inches long. An interesting process of creation, and as we consider today’s Gospel, we notice Jesus did not use sweet potatoes for his analogy – he used grapes and that reveals something about how we as people of faith must live. Sweet potato cuttings can easily generate new plants and potatos on their own. In great contrast, grape branches must be attached to the vine in order to produce fruit.

In this teaching Jesus continues his emphasis on the disciples staying connected to him. This is no arbitrary or casual teaching because the connection with Jesus and with God is the only thing that allows the disciples to change the world. In a few weeks we will celebrate Pentecost – the birthday of the Church, when the disciples are filled with the Holy Spirit. This event, following their transforming encounters the risen Christ, are the reason faith in Jesus, the Christ is alive and well almost 2000 years after he walked on earth. The Grape vine and branch also teach us an important truth about how God works in the world because the line of nourishment and energy does not just go one way. A Grape vine must receive sugars from the leaves on the branched to continue its work of sending water and minerals to the branches. Jesus is teaching us that we have an interactive relationship with God. It’s not that God ultimately needs us to exist, but there is definitely a sense in which God’s impact on the world is magnified or diminished by how much we give energy to God’s dreams. The more we receive from the vine – the more we grow leaves and bear fruit – causing us to send more energy to God and the whole cycle begins again.

Why is this important for us to remember? Well I think the words of Franklin Lee Pastor, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, in Naples makes that clear. “When Jesus uses the

grapevine as a metaphor for understanding our relationship to Him and to God, included in the image is that bearing fruit becomes our purpose. The fruit that Jesus has produced is love for all of the branches who are grafted into him. We branches exist to reflect God's love for the world." He goes on to say, "I was not brought up by my parents and community to be a lover. I was raised to be able to make it on my own. Success was not measured by how much I loved others, but by how much I was able to achieve in studies, athletics and the working world. When I accepted the call to be a pastor, I heard Jesus say to Peter as if it were me, "Do you love me? Then love my brothers and sisters." If this is the call and commission of the Risen Christ to all of us, then we must stay close to Jesus and His words and actions, because it is a quite different message than the one we receive from our world."

Rev. Lee is right to suggest that we are programmed and encouraged to be self-sufficient, to make it on our own. But that is not what Jesus asks of us, in fact he clearly condemns it by saying, "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." Jesus does not preach about self-reliance, but radical God – reliance. We can do nothing without God. Nothing. Nothing.

I don't know about you, but I have a hard time remembering that. As I have moved forward in life I have been encouraged in my successes and rewarded financially and by the admiration of others, and sometimes I begin to believe the things others have said about me and I forget that without connection to God I can do nothing of lasting value. Somehow other faiths do a better job with this reminder- Muslims pray 5 times a day. Roman Catholics have daily Mass. But somehow we Protestants are given the message that a one hour shot in the arm on Sunday is all we need. Hmmmm.

The 11th of Alcoholics Anonymous' 12 steps has something to teach us about the need to make a conscious effort to stay connected to God on a daily basis. It reads,

“Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood God, praying only for knowledge of God’s will for us and the power to carry that out.” As people of faith, we strive to carry out God’s will in this world. That is the goal of our faith. But Step 11 reminds us that we must constantly “improve our contact with God.” This is how the disciples found the power to “turn the world upside down.” I think Rev. Lee has reminded us that it is being connected to the Love of Christ that is crucial to sharing God’s will. In this world where people use the “will of God” to judge acts of intolerance, hatred and violence, we know that it is only divine love or the Love of the Vine that will make a difference, that will bring peace. And that love is not easy to cultivate. The competitive – dog eat dog - zero sum philosophy of the world does not speak of love of neighbor, much less love of the enemy. And so we must stay connected to the vine, the divine source of love.

So how do we do that? Certainly coming to worship every week is an important way to strengthen our connection to the vine. Daily reading, prayer and meditation can be a great help. This can be in the form of a daily devotional via email and the UCC has several. We put one of our Facebook page daily. Or daily reading also come in a new technology called a book. We can listen to music which inspires and fills us. Some find silent meditation to be a centering and strengthening process... and by the way we are having a meditation service every Tuesday at 7 pm. Some find spiritual strength in doing things, yoga, sewing prayer shawls.... Whatever way we become connected to the divine vine... we should do it, and do it often. These are the way we can become more faithful disciples and thus a more faithful congregation.

Through more conscious contact with God we can receive what we need to do the things God wants us to do, and we can begin to hear the gentle but firm voice of the Divine master gardener who sometimes seeks to prune away some of the things that do not bear fruit in our lives.

And now we gather at this table to symbolically take in Jesus' courage and faith and perhaps most importantly, his love. And to truly love one another we must abide, live in the Spirit of Jesus. We must allow ourselves to bask in the Son-light of God's Love to be filled up with love enough to share. As the old song goes, what the world needs now is love.... It's the only thing that there's just too little of. So as we come to the table, let us acknowledge to ourselves how much we need and yearn for the Love of God. Let us realize our hunger and thirst for it, so we might find the spiritual nourishment from the Vine of God and let it deep inside us to fill our need to overflowing so we can share it with all we meet

Jude: On that last night with his disciples, Jesus took the bread and after giving thanks

Brian:

Jude: He broke it and gave it to them say and saying, "This is my body broken for you." then after supper he the cup and after giving thanks

Brian:

Jude: He took the cup and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you remember me until I come again.

Brian: Faith UCC has an open table....

John 15:1-8 '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.