
“I am the True Vine”

This morning, we pick up with the last of the “I am” stories from John’s gospel. You remember some of the “I am’s” Jesus uses to define himself?

I am the light of the world. I am the bread of life. I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. I am the Gate. I am the Good Shepherd.

Here this morning, Jesus continues his goodbye speech to his beloved ones gathered together one last time, he tells them this:

I am the True Vine.

From there he describes not only his relationship to God as vine to vintner but also his relationship to his disciples as grapevine to branches.

Here we discover how God’s character is lived out in Jesus’ promise to abide with them always, how God promises to stay with, to hold fast; and to constantly endure with the beloved.

It must have been a challenging speech for Jesus to make.

Gathered together in the privacy of an upper room, they serve one another, they break bread together, and then they begin the painful process of

letting go what has been a formative relationship.

Relying on the metaphor of himself as the vine and his Holy Father as the vintner, Jesus models his own trust in God’s guiding hand.

Here in the text, Jesus declares his willingness to have the branches of his own life pruned at God, the Vintner’s discretion.

Here, Jesus provides us a template for being in relationship with both God and himself.

Here, in the 4th verse of the 15th chapter of John’s gospel, Jesus reminds us of the interrelatedness we share in this trinity of relationships.

Here, Jesus also reminds us that the promise of God’s abiding presence brings with it some expectations.

Here, Jesus tells his beloved followers: “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 (bear fruit) unless you abide in me.”*

Jesus’s self description as the grapevine, God as the vintner, and the disciples as the branches would have

been a helpful and familiar image for those first Christians living in the aftermath of Jesus' death on the cross.

In many different places in scripture, those first followers would have easily recognized the vine/vintner/branches imagery of relationship.

In many different parts of their life together in the context of first century Palestine, grapevines and branches, vintners and vineyards were familiar aspects of everyday living.

I wonder, though, how effective is this imagery of relationship for us gathered here this day?

For some of us as farmers, gardeners, vinters, the answer may be 'yes'.

For others, the answer may be 'no'.

What I'm aware of is this: It's really hard to tell how these familiar biblical images inform our faith lives unless we talk about it.

And that's something we, as United Church folks are not very practiced at doing.

Unless, that is, you attend bible study or book group or are faced with a crisis.

These seem to be among the few preferred locations and events where many of us United Church folk are willing to articulate how our biblical stories inform our relationship with God through Jesus or even how our

faith intersects with our lives and our actions.

From my perspective as your transitional minister, that is of significant concern.

I am aware, you see, that an unarticulated faith is not only be hard to grasp hold of, it can be hard to model for others.

This articulation of faith and purpose is what you, your church leaders, and your staff here at Trinity have been focused on in recent years.

Through your vision, mission, and values statement you have begun the important work of bringing clarity to your relationship with God and with Jesus.

Your revised model of governance is similarly focused as a tool for guiding your response to God's call and God's claim on your life as a faith community.

To be sure there's bound to be some ongoing tension in finding new ways to get comfortable and curious about finding the inherent gift of these tools for your life as a faith community.

That said, time is fleeting.

Many of us are becoming increasingly aware of our aging demographic and our flagging energy.

Without guidelines and clarity of purpose, the various branches of our

church communities will not bear new fruit.

Here, this morning, in my role as your transitional clergy, I want to challenge you to be open to thinking and acting in new ways, including being more attentive to your relationships with Jesus through God and they inform your faith life and your ministries.

What would it look like, for example, to really see and to celebrate how each of your ministries function as interconnected branches in relationship with God through Jesus as our core?

What, for example, would your life together look like if you were to entrust those ministries in need of pruning to the God we know in Jesus so that new and healthy blossoms might bloom and bear new fruit?

To my way of thinking, entering into some disciplined prayer practices might be a place to begin.

Now, while I know that for many of you gathered for worship, talking about how your stories from scripture inform your prayer and your relationship with God through Jesus is a very personal thing.

I know, for example, that many here much prefer to live out your relationships with God through Jesus as doers of the God's Word rather than prayers.

I know there are some here who are rooted in a theological understanding

of being the church means getting out and sharing the good news of the risen Christ with the unchurched.

I know there are others among us here who are rooted in a theological understanding of being the church as needing to stay put, to hold fast to the traditions and sacraments and to experience them in the same ways Sunday after Sunday.

Then, I am aware there are some here rooted in a theological understanding of being the church is about sharing their gifts and skills in partnership with other churches and other organizations.

Last but never least, there are others here rooted in a theological understanding of church being about making space for God's Spirit to be experienced through alternative worship services such as the chanting of Taize hymns, the divine reading of scripture, the laying on of hands, the lighting of candles, and even the walking of the labyrinth.

However you are rooted in God through Jesus, be it evangelical, missional, ecclesial, ecumenical, or spiritual, the good news is this: There is always room for a diversity of expressions of faith here at Trinity!

That said, these different branches of faithful living, these different understandings of relationship with God and with Jesus need to be connected at their core by the teachings of Jesus.

From my own perspective of having served in numerous pastoral charges very similar to what I am experiencing here at Trinity, it often feels as though we tend to over emphasize our connection to the local church rather than to make our relationship to God and Jesus our first priority.

Friends, let us be mindful about confining our relationship to God through Jesus to our friendships and our tasks as the church.

Let us be mindful not to confuse 'the gods of how we have always done things' or the 'gods of the quick solutions' with God's relentless invitation to us through Jesus.

Let us not lose sight of that invitation God offers us through Jesus to deepen the relationship bonds that exist within, among, and through us.

Let us, instead, find ways of tapping down deep in our lives to the roots of our relationship with God through God's promise to abide with us in and through Jesus.

One of the ways we can do that is through prayer.

Here's my encouragement for your take away with you this week:

Imagine yourself undertaking a daily practice of staying still and acknowledging that God is God.

To paraphrase, I'm inviting you to set aside some intentional time each day to abide in God.

Imagine yourself turning over all your cares about your own life, the life of your family, friends, and neighbours, and the life of your church, your community, your region even to God's care and protection.

Now imagine yourself praying for those you don't understand, those you fear, and those you dislike.

Imagine yourself making room in your life to acknowledge God's presence and God's desire to abide in your heart.

Imagine doing that for a 10 minutes every day for a week or a month or a season.

Next, imagine yourself saying 'yes' and saying 'no'.

Imagine saying 'no' to that which you find worrisome or distracting.

Imagine saying 'yes' to freedom, to the power of truth, to joy even.

Lastly, imagine opening your hands and hearts to the treasures of each others' stories, each others' hopes and dreams, and each others' experiences of prayer.

Here in the fifteenth chapter of John's gospel, Jesus offers these words of hope "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."
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For the sake of the church and its purpose within and beyond our walls,

my fondest prayer on this fifth Sunday in the season of Easter, is that it may it be so! Amen.

* New Standard Revised Version, The gospel according to John, Chapter 15, verse 4, p. 2043

**NRSV, verse 7, p. 2043

***Some of the ideas for prayer take their impetus from a sermon offered by The Rev. Martha Sterne, Holy Innocents' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, GA, May 21, 2000-see http://day1.org/681-sermon_for_the_5th_Sunday_of_easter.
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