

## Sermon – 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter – John 15: 1-8

Many believe the conversation Jesus was having with his disciples in today's Gospel reading, took place on the night of the Last Supper, after Judas Iscariot had left. He was giving them a beautiful image of how to remain fruitful in all they do when he was no longer there physically to guide them. It's a wonderful metaphor that can guide us too. In the "Reflections" section for this gospel reading, in The New Interpreter's Bible, Gail O'Day asked an interesting question; "What would 'church' look like if it embraced this model in its corporate life?" In other words, what would our church life together look like if we followed, in reality, what Jesus described in this metaphor?

Consider how a grapevine grows. The best fruit is the fruit growing closest to the main vine. We're told in the reading that the vine is Jesus. It is there that the fruit receives the most nourishment. Being connected to the vine seemed to be very important to Jesus. In fact, in this reading, he used the phrase "abide in me" five times. This is where the disciples, and each of us, will draw our spiritual nourishment from. Nourishment that will help us grow. It sounded like Jesus was reminding the disciples and us of the greatest commandment, to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind."

As the branches of the vine are nourished and grow, they begin to wrap around each other and it becomes impossible to distinguish one branch from another. No one branch stands out. They all seem to be one with each other.

Gail O'Day pointed out that a church community following this model would, "not be a community built around individual accomplishments, choices, or rights." Instead, it would be a community that makes sure they are, first and foremost, drawing their spiritual nourishment from Jesus and His teachings. "They would be a community known for their corporate acts of Godly love."

As we observe the characteristics of a grapevine, we can also see that no one branch is greater than the other. As the branches grow from the main vine no one branch holds a higher status or is more important than the other. This image may seem challenging to those of us living in this modern world. However, Jesus is saying we are all the same before God. In the words of O'Day, "all branches grow out of the one central vine and are tended to equally by one gardener. There is only one measure of one's place in the faith community – to love as Jesus has loved – and all, great and small, ordained and lay, young and old, male and female are equally accountable to that standard. The

mark of the faithful community is how it loves, not who its members are.”

So, what does it mean to love as Jesus loved? All we need to do is look to the second part of the Great Commandment, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” This love Jesus was talking about was not an emotional love, as we would have for a spouse or a child, it’s what is known as *agape* love. *Agape* love is caring for the well-being of someone, even if you don’t like that person or disagree with them. When church communities come together disagreements can arise. Jesus’s disciples learned that as they wrestled with different ways of doing things, like the idea of baptizing Gentiles who had not been circumcised. Disagreements like this among church communities have happened throughout the centuries. Even in times of disagreement, Jesus tells us to love (with *agape* love) as Jesus loved. Today’s Epistle from John reminds us, “By this, we know that we abide in him and he in us.”

Some of you here today may see two separate congregations, with different cultures, languages, and life experiences. What I see, what God sees and I pray we all see, are brothers and sisters in Christ, clinging to the same vine. Brothers and sisters whose lives are wrapped around and intertwined with each other. As we grow together,

honoring each person equally, caring for the needs and concerns of each person with agape love, we will be changed. What may seem to be our differences can become a source of growth for all of us.

Gail O'Day did indeed ask an interesting question. "What would a 'church' look like if it followed, in reality, the metaphor that Jesus described? It would look like us, brothers and sisters in Christ, growing in love, *agape* love, preparing each other, encouraging each other, living together, always looking to Jesus to guide us. It would look like a vine weighed down with abundant fruit. Fruit that is used to feed a very hungry world!

Amen.