

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Easter 5-B; 29 April 2018
St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster

Vine and Branches

In nomine...

I. Intro

'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.' (Jn 15.1-5a NRSV)

I am new to the Diocese of New Jersey, and I am enjoying building relationships with a new community of colleagues and fellow-believers. The Diocese provides a “Fresh Start” program for priests during the first two years of service in any new cure, so I go up to Trenton each month to participate in that. I have been helping to form a Bible Study group for the clergy of our convocation, with the dual purpose of fellowship and sermon preparation. And this week St. Thomas’ hosted Clericus, the monthly meeting of Episcopal clergy from around the Woodbury Convocation.

One of the reasons I love being an Episcopalian is because I value the connections we have to the wider church. Those connections make us stronger! I find fellow clergy like Deacon John and those from other nearby parishes to be wise, encouraging conversation partners as I seek to do my work faithfully. I have found Bishop Stokes to be a wise, responsive, and encouraging leader for this Diocese, and I find Presiding Bishop Curry to be an inspiring voice for our tradition.

In the Episcopal Church, we remember that history matters, our roots matter. Our roots and our history are the foundation through which we reach for understanding of the Gospel, of what God is doing in human history, and what God is up to in our own lives. There is value in our tradition: we don’t have to figure out everything from scratch. We’ve been given helpful tools

in the rites of the church, the structures of the church, and the writings of theologians. We are less prone to being blown about by the winds of fad and fashion because we measure innovation against the canon of the faith we have received. Like grapes growing from a vine, we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before, and thus enjoy a practice of faith that is ready to meet the future with authenticity and confidence.

II. Thesis: Individuals

In our Gospel today, Jesus grabs another biblical metaphor, as he did with the Good Shepherd last week, and says “I am the true vine and my Father is the vine-grower.” Jesus uses this illustration to tell us something fundamental and important about our relationship to God. Jesus is the source of life and energy, and it is as we remain connected to Jesus that our lives will bear fruit.

This sounds like a church-y idea, no? The Sunday-School answer is always “Jesus!” We can get lost in theological language that doesn’t seem to connect to our day-to-day lives, so it can be hard, sometimes, to wrap our heads around what it means for Jesus to be the vine and us to be branches that are rooted in him, bearing fruit.

Remember, the fruit of the Spirit’s not a grape. Nor is it a banana. The fruit of the Spirit, St. Paul tells us, is things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The fruit of the Spirit was seen in Philip when he answered a divine appointment, was available to talk to the strange man from another country, and bore witness to the work God was doing already in that man’s heart. The fruit of the Spirit is seen in us, says our Epistle reading today, when we love one another.

When we’re connected to Jesus, this is the fruit that comes out of us. We can’t even help it! Like an apple tree makes apples, so when we are connected to Jesus, we will produce spiritual fruit. And because God loves us, we will experience some pruning as well. That is God helping us, reshaping our lives in order that we might be more fruitful. Pruning means change, and change hurts. But we were made to bear fruit, and doing anything less is to know the misery of a life not fully lived. God has promised not to abandon us to that unhappy fate.

III. Good News

But I'm not just talking about us as individuals. The Bible has an uncanny habit of talking more about the community than the individual. The extreme emphasis on individual salvation is often a product of the modern western church. Because Jesus' words here mean a lot more than just how "Jesus and me" can be buddies.

In the Diocese of New Jersey, as in Dioceses across the United States, I have heard anxiety and lamentation about churches that are shrinking and even closing. Some of you have experienced the tender sadness of watching the church you grew up in shutter its doors. Times are changing, full-time clergy is expensive to keep, and the economics of being a small church are much harder than they used to be. Fund-raisers are not nearly as effective as they once were in supplementing church budgets. I know this from watching churches at work and from talking to Rectors of other small churches.

St. Thomas' is doing better than very many churches, and we have a lot going for us. But sometimes we too can feel the anxiety, the same existential threat, as we look at our budget deficit and a smaller cohort of children in our programs than we once enjoyed.

Do not be afraid!

God is not resource-poor. In the Kingdom of God, there is no poverty: that is an intrusion from human brokenness. The lack we all experience from time to time is simply a sign that God's Kingdom has not yet come into our lives in its fullness.

Our call is to be rooted in Christ Jesus, to cultivate in our church community and in ourselves individually relationship with Jesus. Our call is to prayer and worship, contemplation and communion, service and study, fasting and fellowship. In these and other activities we grow in our connection to the vine who is Jesus, and we prepare ourselves to bear the fruit of God's Spirit.

Do not be afraid! God will do some pruning among us. When times are hard and we encounter conflict or discouragement, those are the very signs that God is present and doing something new among us. That's why it hurts. The pain holds great promise. God is trimming off unfruitful attitudes, unhelpful habits, and unhealthy attachments to property or programs or

practices that no longer serve us well. God is removing the things that dissipate our attention and strengthening our connection to the vine.

Do not be afraid! The fruit does not emerge through our own strength and abilities. This is not a test! Our calling is a humble one of staying connected to the vine. As we do that, God will bring forth fruit in abundance.

IV. Invitation

Springtime has seemed delayed this year, but it's coming, finally. Everything is growing and you don't have to drive very far from Glassboro to see grapevines growing in the fields. Those vines which were brittle and dormant during the winter are re-awakening and renewing the connections from every branch to vine to root to earth.

Churches go through seasons, though they don't necessarily correspond to the solar calendar. Now is a time for re-awakening, revival, at St. Thomas'. Now is the time for us to renew our personal and corporate attachments to the vine, who is Jesus, and to open our ears to hear what God's call is to St. Thomas' in this season.

This is an exciting time and one filled with pruning and change. Do not be afraid! This is Christ's church, God is at work here, and it is God who will accomplish God's desired purpose in us. Our call is simply to be faithful, constantly to renew our connection to Jesus our vine, and to witness God's work among us.

AMEN