

Fifth Easter B 2018
Church of the Advent

I Am the Vine

What an interesting selection of scripture we have to wrestle with today. Keeping in mind we are still celebrating the Great Fifty Days of Easter—marking the time between the Resurrection and Pentecost—we are offered stories about the disciples where Jesus, their teacher, is trying his best to cram every last bit of knowledge and understanding into their heads before their time together is up—trying to get them ready for a graduation of sorts when Jesus will ascend back to the Father and they will become the teachers.

What comes to mind is that urgency of that last month of cramming every last bit of advice I might have neglected to mention—wanted or unwanted—to each of my sons in turn right before they left for college, knowing from that last moment on—for the rest of their lives—they would be living outside the bounds of my reach and control. Eventually I became so annoying to each of them in my desperation for them to avoid all wrong paths and to take the work of learning seriously, that I borrowed (tongue in cheek) a line from *Almost Famous*, a film by Cameron Crowe that is one of the greatest coming of age films of all time. Meant to capture every fear of every parent of every bad thing that could possibly happen to an almost adult child, each time Frances McDormand's character dropped off her son—the main character—to cover another 70's rock and roll band for The Rolling Stone, she would shout from her car, *Don't do drugs!* At least when I said it, it made my boys laugh, but it was code for *I love you and you're on your own now but I'll still be here, always*, and I knew they knew that.

With time getting short, how did Jesus decide what was most important—what was essential—for the disciples to understand to be able to fulfill their mission? How did he get their attention to prepare them for the serious challenges that lay ahead of them, when they were most likely relaxing into the glorious security of having Jesus back with them, after having been so recently shocked and grieved by his death? Jesus

knew that they were in for a *second* parting, and that they would be set ablaze by the Holy Spirit not long after—but the disciples did not know this. So how did he get their attention without scaring them off completely? How did he offer that unsought advice in a way that would ground them, strengthen them, direct them, and still leave room for their own gifts to blossom? How did he communicate that his message was life-and-death serious, and still filled with hope and promise? He told them a parable.

I am the vine and you are the branches. But not just one of those grape vines like you see on those professionally photographed and touched up wine-tasting vineyard brochures where the perfectly green-leafed vines are bursting with grapes in perfect formation. You know the ones I mean, where it shows beautiful people holding up wine glasses and smiling in the sun, like they are tasting a bit of heaven on earth. Beautiful vineyards that attract the wine tour buses certainly do bear much fruit, but never reveal all that it takes to get them picture perfect condition.



In the real world, grape vines need a lot of work. First, they like acidic sandy soil that is not *too* fertile. If the soil is too rich, the vine grows too fast and does not bear well. They like full sun, but they *can* get sunburned and need to be planted in a north-south orientation on an eastern or southern slope—parallel to prevailing winds—to get the air circulating under their broad leaves to help them from succumbing to fungus—but not *too* much wind. You plant the first new shoots after the danger of the last spring frost and then remove all but the two strongest shoots, cutting away *all* of the flower clusters in the first year—so no grapes for a while. The first few years the vines

require meticulous pruning—up to 90% of each year’s new growth is cut away leaving only a few buds per foot until the vine is well established. Then some branches bear fruit and others must be cut way back so that the bearing branches can receive the sun, the nutrients, and the protection from insects that they need. All along, some parts of the vine are sacrificed so that other parts of the vine can grow and flourish. The weeds around the vines need to be pulled out by hand, because the grapes need the soil to be warm but they are highly sensitive to weed killers. Finally when the grapes are ripe, they need to be carefully hand-picked at their time of maximum sweetness.

I am the vine and you are the branches. The branch cannot bear fruit by itself—it needs the vine. It is the growth of the vine that spreads itself along a trellis, that draws the nourishment from the root and carries the life of the plant and the deep promise of the fruit. The grapes are born from the branches, but if the branches are not cared for in a manner which foremost preserves the vine, there will be no grapes—no fruit.

Abide in me as I in you, Jesus told them. *Abide* means to accept, or to act according to a rule or recommendation, to obey, to follow, uphold, or heed. It can also mean to endure, or to suffer, or alternately, to stay, to remain, to survive and persist—not necessarily words of comfort, but words of purpose, commitment, and relationship.

The beautiful fruit born of this teaching can be seen in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles—a book of stories of the early adventures that happened to the disciples after Pentecost, *after* they had learned all they could before Jesus left them, and *after* the Holy Spirit had pumped them up to spread the Good News about Jesus wherever they went. The disciple Phillip had been sent by an angel down a wilderness road to Gaza—a place where he would likely encounter people outside his regular circles. Taking off into the world alone—with a message that didn’t always play well amongst people who were as likely to kill them as listen to them—must have been scary for the disciples. Fine words and beautiful parables would have been so much more comforting in the moment when they were in each other’s company and Jesus was close enough to touch. But Phillip went anyway, probably not knowing what to expect until he came upon the Ethiopian eunuch, faithfully reading his scriptures and hungry to have the

Word of God taught to him. Phillip—abiding in the vine—was led by the Spirit to act not out of fear but in love—to help this stranger understand God’s love expressed in the world from Isaiah to Jesus, and to baptize him right there on the spot.

The first letter of John would have us see that abiding in the vine is the same as abiding in perfect love—for God is love—and that when we follow, uphold, heed, and persist—that is abide—in perfect love, then there is nothing to fear, ever, in pouring out love to every brother and sister on every wilderness road—without exception. God’s perfect love casts out fear, leaving us free to trust the vine grower to know what we need in order to live lives of abundance, bearing much fruit.

God knows, being a Christian is sometimes not as easy as it sounds. That vineyard metaphor is all well and good when we imagine God as the master vintner, and ourselves as those smiling people on the brochure holding up the wine glasses without a care in the world, with everything in control. It is a little harder to buy when we consider the careful tending and the waiting and the pruning and the weeding that is part of the bargain. Care and attention, patience and perseverance, discernment and commitment are all needed to tend to the Christian life—to tend to the Vine that is our source of nourishment, and to bear the fruit that will nourish others on our path. Yet in our abiding in God and God in us, we are promised—guaranteed—a love so powerful and perfect that fear is cast away. And we are promised that the Spirit is ready to offer us whatever we need to travel the wilderness roads, to welcome the strangest of strangers, and to spread the Good News as Jesus taught us in his parting words, which in the end were code for, *I love you and you’re on your own now, but I’ll still be here, always.*

AMEN