

“Branching Out”

Valley Presbyterian Church – April 29, 2018

Fifth Sunday of Easter

I John 4:7-12, 16b-21

Rev. John Wahl

John 15:1-8

Faith has always been like a coin with two sides. On one face, faith is a matter of the head and the heart – it’s about what you know and how you feel. On the flip-side, faith is a matter of the hands and the feet – it’s about what you do and where you go to do it. In the fifteenth chapter of John, we get a little of both. On the one hand, faith is about abiding: remaining still and calm in one place, rooted securely in Jesus. At the same time, though, we are called produce fruit: to be verdant, vibrant and active in our faith.

In last week’s reading from the Gospel of John, we encountered the image of the Good Shepherd to describe the close, caring relationship between God and Jesus, and therefore, Jesus and us. Though most of us are not herders of sheep, or spent much time around them, we get the gist of what John is talking about. For many of us, the words of the 23rd Psalm, *The Lord is my shepherd*, are comforting and familiar. And from childhood, we’ve seen paintings of Jesus carrying the little lamb over his shoulders, the flock grazing peacefully around him. Thinking of ourselves as lambs, enfolded in God’s care, never abandoned or alone, can be, especially in difficult times, very reassuring.

In this week’s reading, John uses the image of a vine and its branches to help us – and, also, to challenge us – to claim our close relationship with Jesus. People in Jesus’ day, familiar with the Hebrew scriptures, would have known this metaphor about the vine describing Israel’s connection to God. Their promise of land included the prospect of planting vines and harvesting from them.

Imagining the vineyard, we see the many entwined branches, winding their way around one another in tight curls, such that it’s impossible to tell where one branch starts and the other ends. This is not just intricate, it’s also intimate; the vine sharing with its branches all the nutrients needed to sustain them. As Gale O’Day suggests, “In a vine, the branches are almost completely indistinguishable from one another. All run together as they grow out of the central vine.”¹ All the branches belong to the same vine and are tended by the same vine-grower. There is no status, all are equal, and everyone is responsible for bearing fruit. The only condition is to love each other in the same way that Jesus loved us.

This, of course, is the theme of today’s first reading from First John – that God is the very source and definition of love. God loves as the sun shines; love expresses who

¹ As quoted by Osvolda Vena on *WorkingPreacher.com*

God is. God made love real and present by sending Jesus to live among us and to give his life for us. God continues to show us love through Jesus' life-giving presence among us. God's love is a truth as reliable as the ground we walk on and the air we breathe.

God's love does not depend on our initiative or worthiness. We don't have to reach out to God in order to be loved. We don't have to clean up our act or measure up to some standard. Nothing is so broken or so offensive that God is unwilling to forgive it. God embraces us as we are, loves us as we are, and works in us to make us clean, whole and new. God loves us whether we deserve it or not.

If we love others as God has loved us, there can be no boundaries. God's love, made visible and present in Jesus, is the source for the love we share with others. Jesus ignored the limits that the religious communities of his day imposed. He ate and spent time with people whom the faith leaders had rejected as sinful, dirty and despised. He welcomed people that everyone else rejected; he touched people who were considered untouchable. If Jesus shows us what God's love is like, then there can be no doubt how far our love for others must extend.

Verse 18 assures us that *there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear*. The Greek word that John uses here for "fear" is *phobos*, which, of course, is the root for all of our various English words ending in "-phobia." Many of us live with such phobias: fear of heights or crowds, birds or spiders. But John does not mean phobias like that; instead, he connects this fear that has no place in perfect love with a *fear of punishment* – that often lingering belief that God does not accept and love us as we are; that there is something more we have to do to deserve and earn it; deeper belief or better deeds.

"The less sure you are about God's unconditional love toward you," says Scot Hoezee, "the greater you fear. And the greater you fear, the more likely it is you will find it hard to treat other people with the love of Christ because so much of life will feel threatening."² But to know God's perfect love is to be filled with the peace and joy that go with it. There will no longer be room for fear in a heart filled to the brim with loving reassurance. And from the overflow of that divinely inspired love will come rivers of kindness toward others.

And so, Jesus encourages us in John's Gospel, we must abide in him as he abides in us. All of the branches are part of the vine; that is, part of Jesus' mystical body. The secret to a productive branch is its attachment to the vine, its relationship to Jesus and his community – a theme expressed by the idea of abiding, or remaining. This word, indicating a loyalty or deep attachment to Jesus, and to God, appears nine times in these 8 verses, and over 40 times in John's Gospel.

² Scot Hoezee from *Center for Preaching Excellence*.

Abiding is important in John, where love of God means mutual indwelling. When Jesus speaks in chapter 14 about the many rooms in his Father's house, they are actually "abiding places." As Jesus' own have places prepared for them in God, so also the Son and the Father will abide in them. So, the vine image is another way of talking about abiding places – places where we feel deeply at home – and both the vine and the abiding places are ways of talking about love.

But like the phobia of judgment mentioned in First John, the image of pruning here in John's Gospel can get us flustered. The branches that are cut off, those that are not bearing fruit, are thrown into the fire to burn. As Emily Askew observes, "living in the promises of God will come with times when we experience the cutting away of what might have seemed to us to have been vital."³ Loss is always painful; even if it ends up freeing us to focus more clearly on what is most important.

The best grapes, though, are those that are located closest to the vine where the nutrients are most concentrated. Therefore, in our longing to feel more connected to God, our chances for fruitful living only increase. It is there, close to the vine, that we can find peace regarding the life challenges we all face; those things we work and pray for, because there our will becomes aligned with God's own will. Pruning is not necessarily violent, but can be done purposefully and lovingly. What remains is centered and focused on God.

The good news is that it's not up to us to dig down deep and make everything happen on our own. If we remain close to Jesus, abiding in his love, we will find a source for grace and strength we need in our lives. "We bear fruit not by squeezing it out of ourselves, but because we are extensions of the vine, pruned by the vine-grower who wants us to be fruitful and to be drawn into the unity of the Father and the Son."⁴ God's love, presence and pruning are all gifts – unmerited and priceless – but the choice of where we abide in faith belongs to us.

So, maybe you are a head and heart believer – and your fruit is borne out of prayer, study and quiet acts of devotion. Or, on the other hand, you might love through your hands and feet – doing good deeds for others, seemingly always on the go. Either way, by abiding in Jesus and remaining close to the vine, the very love of God will be made known through your love. As sure as sun shines upon us, God's unconditional love is present and available to us; always there to comfort and inspire us.

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God. (I John 4:7) Thanks be to God. Amen.

³ As quoted by Kathryn Matthews in *Sermon Seeds*

⁴ Meda Stamper in *WorkingPreacher.com*