

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

April 28, 2024 – EASTER 5, YR. B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Stay Connected to Jesus—for Life!*”

Acts 8:26-40 (Philip encounters, teaches, and baptizes the Ethiopian on the road)
Psalm 22:24-30 (Kingship and salvation belong to the Lord)
1 John 4:7-21 (Let us love one another for love is of God)
St. John 15:1-8 (Jesus is the true vine. We are the branches.)

In today's Gospel, Jesus explains to His disciples that He is the vine and we are the branches, while His Father is the caretaker, the gardener, the dresser of the vineyard. In Last Sunday's Scriptures, we heard that Jesus is the Good Shepherd, that He knows us and calls us each by name; He comes to lead us into green pastures and will always be with us. When we call upon Him, He will heal us, be near us, and never abandon us.

All of these are very encouraging words, but we must wonder “What is Jesus doing with these two parables?” One is about a loving, caring keeper of sheep—and the other is about a plant that provides fruit for wine! To understand the drama behind Jesus' words, we need to put them into context—for these are words spoken at the end of the Last Supper.

He has washed His disciples' feet and told them how much He loves them. He has explained that they must learn to wash each other's feet, in order to become humble servants. They must learn to be givers, not takers, because they have been chosen to bring the message that He came to bring to the whole world. A message of compassion and forgiveness, of self-sacrifice and caring, of building a community on the love of God and love of each other.

Now, Jesus comes to the end of the supper, which He has already said is the last meal He will eat with them until His Father's kingdom comes (Mark 14:25). And that adds a certain intensity to “I am the vine and you are the branches,” because a shepherd is one step removed from us. He's the one who guides us and walks beside us—a warm, comforting presence. But when Jesus says, “I am the vine and you are the branches,” He means, “I'm with you, you're with me, and there's no separation between us”—unless, like a grape separated from its vine, you want to shrivel and die.

In a few moments, He will walk to the Garden of Gethsemane and the Passion will begin. So, these will be the last words Jesus says in the same conversational way as when He was with them daily. When He leaves Gethsemane, the next words they will hear from Jesus will be His cries of anguish on the cross and then He will be buried. But of course, the Resurrection is coming—even if they don't yet understand.

So, the words Jesus speaks to His beloved followers—and is speaking to each of us—are very clear: That the Risen Lord will be with us and will be part of us. He will be with, and live in, us throughout our lives. He will never desert us. Because He is in a relationship with us that is more intimate than any we will ever know, there is no separating ourselves from Jesus except at our peril—spiritually and in every other way.

This is not just a relationship of siblings, or even very close friends. This relationship is *life itself*. For the God that has sent Christ into our hearts and lives has made us one with Jesus and the Father and the Holy Spirit. That's why it's so important for Jesus that His followers understand this precious, life-giving unity, because in a few hours, they will all deny Him and run away and be scattered.

But Jesus wants them to remember what He said while they were sitting together, sharing the Last Supper with Him, when He was about to give His whole life for them. So, it's important for us, too, when He says: “I am the vine and you are the branches.” What He means is that as believers in Christ, we don't just walk with Him or hang out beside Him—like those sheep with the shepherd. No! Because He is *within* us! We also find Him in each other, and in our community, and sometimes in those outside our community.

The risen Christ has become, through His own incarnation and by the power of the Holy Spirit, incarnate in every believer. That means, when we look at each other, we must remember we are looking at Christ. The ways we treat one another, we must treat one another not as mere solitary individuals who are nice to each other—but as people who are filled with God in a union and an intimacy that will last for all eternity.

And this is why Jesus says to them, “You cannot separate the vine from the branches, nor can you separate the branches from the vine.”* Here is a great mystery! Jesus is telling us: “You are dependent upon me, but also God Himself is dependent on you.” The branches need the vine in order to grow and produce fruit; but the vine also needs the branches *because* they bear fruit, and the fruit is the fruit of the Kingdom—that which Jesus came into the world to establish.

But what *is* the fruit of the kingdom? Start by looking at Galatians 5:22-23 (NASB): “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, [and] self-control.” Also, check out 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a (NIV): “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.”

When we show forth these qualities as we live out our lives, we exhibit Christlike behavior. As we simply walk and talk we will be the carrying out the message of Jesus—and He will be with us to inspire and lead us. Until Jesus returns in person, we are called to love the way Jesus loves, care the way He cares, serve the way He served, and forgive as He forgave. And in this seemingly small way, if we are persistent, the Kingdom of God will gradually spread throughout the world—or, at least, throughout our little neck of the woods in South Central Pennsylvania.

When I was preparing to go off to college, my Dad sat me down and wanted to offer pithy words of parental guidance but seemed to have difficulty expressing himself. Finally, he just said: “Whatever you do, never dishonor your Father.” And I knew what he meant, though it wouldn’t be easy. He was telling me “do the right thing, and everything will be OK.” Our Heavenly Father, through the words of Jesus, tells us the same thing: No matter what happens, no matter what difficulties are in your life or around you, you must answer those challenges with goodness, kindness, forgiveness, and faith. Faith in God, faith in yourself, and faith in other human beings.

Jesus knew He was offering the “vine and the branches” image to express our vital union with Him because the world was about to enter into a dangerous time of crisis, as the young Church would be born, grow, and then would suffer three hundred years of unrelenting persecution. Once again, we are living in dangerous times of crisis, when we desperately need to hear and hold onto the words with which Jesus assures us that we are in an inseparable relationship with Him and the Father and the Holy Spirit, dwelling within those of us who believe.

One of my favorite videos that appears online is one in which a man finds a stethoscope on the ground. He puts it on, and holds it up to a discarded twinkie—and hears, “sugar, sugar, honey, honey.” Then he holds it up to a STOP sign—and hears, “stop in the name of love.” Next, he puts it up against a utility pole—and hears “lean on me, when you’re not strong.” He runs into a guy in military fatigues, and when the stethoscope is placed on him he hears, “I’m an American soldier.” Holding it against a fire hydrant, he hears “who let the dogs out?” Against a Hell’s Angel’s motorcycle, he hears “bad to the bone.” Then the guy walks toward his church, the logo of which is on his shirt, and when he places the stethoscope over his heart, he hears the Hallelujah Chorus, and the screen reads: Colossians 1:27 (NCV): “God decided to let his people know this rich and glorious secret which he has for all people. This secret is Christ himself, who is in you. He is our only hope for glory.”

Strengthened by Christ within us, showing forth the fruit of the Spirit, and making every effort to love as the Bible says we should, we might just change the world for the better, one Christian at a time!

Let us pray: Dear Jesus, may we never willingly break off or separate our individual branches from the powerfully rooted and strong vine that You have given us in Yourself. And, as we remain connected to You, grant us the strength, courage, and persistence to bear the best fruit for Your Kingdom. And help us to remember when we feel pressed down and oppressed by the world or by our own personal difficulties, that grapes which are crushed and trampled on become the finest wine that eventually brings joy to those who savor it. This we ask in Your blessed, holy, and powerful Name. *Amen.*

*Adapt. Denis J. Hanley, “The Vine and the Branches,” 10 May 2009 < <https://fatherhanly.com/journey-with-father/year-b-5th-sunday-of-easter/> > 19 April 2024.