**May 3, 2015 – 5th Sunday in Easter**

**© 2015 Jean E. Mornard**

Today’s Gospel reading contains the very last parable in the Gospel of John. It forms part of Jesus’ Farewell Discourse. In the Farewell Discourse, Jesus not only tells his disciples what’s going to happen to him, and to them, but he tells them how to live their lives as his disciples. This passage, and the one we’ll hear next week are all about love and community and are desperately important to us in our life together in Christ.

In his vine metaphor, Jesus first lays out, for want of a better word, the hierarchy of the world. I hate to use the word hierarchy here, because that implies a command structure and that’s not quite right. It’s more like a chain of dependence. Jesus says that God is the vinegrower. Without him and his care, the vine couldn’t grow and produce. Then Jesus, himself, is the vine – the conduit through which all life flows to from the ground to the branches. And then finally, we are the branches – dependent upon both the vine and the vinegrower for our life.

Two phrases jump out in this passage which form the central themes. The first is “abide in.” Jesus says some form of “abide in me” six times in these eight verses and he says “as I abide in you” three times. I have mentioned this before, but the word for “abide,” which is *meno*, is a tremendously important work in the Gospel of John. It appears in some form over forty times in John, as opposed to 11 times in the other three Gospels combined.

*Meno* means to stay or rest, or make your home. It implies permanence and rightness, and living. As an example, a cognate of that word, *moné*, is the word used in John 14:2, “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.” Above all, it’s a word of relationship – us to Jesus, and through Jesus, to the Father. It’s really a beautiful concept.

The other important phrase is “bear fruit.” Jesus uses some variant of this phrase seven times in these eight verses. Remember what I said about repetition signifiying emphasis in Jewish writings? These two concepts are really, really important for Jesus to get across to his disciples, and to us.

I want to digress a second to point out a phrase that has often been used to frighten and harm. It’s verse 6: “*Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.”* In some interpretations of Christianity, the threat of hell has been used to make people toe the line, and any reference to burning is used to reinforce that. Well, I won’t bore you with all the grammatical ins and outs, but in this case, the burning part clearly refers to the branches, not to the disciples. Also we have to remember that we’re dealing with a metaphor here. It’s dangerous to take it too literally.

But let’s get back to bearing fruit. If you ever gotten a chance to visit a vineyard, the first thing you notice about the vines is that they are small and very orderly. This is done by careful pruning because otherwise they would take over the entire place. The growers know how and when to cut back the vines in order to produce the most and the best fruit. They also know when to graft a new branch on to renew the life of the whole vine.

Jesus is talking here about the branches and their fruitfulness as a metaphor for being part of a community. Each branch contributes its part, but they can’t do it on their own without the vinegrower and the vine itself. And it’s the community together that produces the most and the best grapes.

Here’s where abiding comes back into the equation. Branches can’t choose to bear grapes. They are dependent on the vine grower and the vine, as I said. And if we’re talking about plants, technically they don’t choose to abide in the vine either. If they’re healthy plants and are grafted onto a healthy vine, they will naturally start to grow as part of that vine – they’ll abide in it.

But we CAN make that choice. We can choose to make ourselves part of Jesus and bear his fruits in the world, or our spirits can wither and dry up and not be useful to God. It basically comes down to if we want to be disciples or not. In this passage, and especially in the passage coming up next week, Jesus tells us how. It’s simple, but not easy.

So individuals can choose to be grafted onto Jesus and abide in him, and so can church communities. It’s not a matter of taking a vote to all go in the same direction, although at least thinking about that might be useful. It’s more about our corporate understanding of what it means to be disciples. And in both cases – individual and communal – it’s about letting the non-fruit-bearing part of our lives be pruned away until only the best part of the branch is left.

So what constitutes bad wood in us as individuals? I think it’s anything that distracts us. Think of the image of a vine gone wild. There are shoots and suckers heading in all directions, and latching on to anything they can – even each other. They take energy and focus from the central, fruit-producing part of the vine. They’re alive, and sometimes even vigorous, but they’re not part of the central purpose of the vine.

These can be things like social media, TV, shopping, sports, anxieties, world disasters or tragedies, hurt feelings, competition, work problems, resentment, or anger. I’m not saying we should all join a cloistered monastery, but when any of these kinds of distractions become overwhelming, they block us from producing real fruit.

And similarly, in whole churches, similar kinds of things can really get in the way of a community being productive and fruitful for God. Anger and disagreement, factions, hurt feelings and resentment, fear of the future - these can all cause a church to end up frozen in place and time until the distraction has been recognized and, in many cases, healing has begun.

In my old home parish, St. Mark’s Cathedral in Minneapolis, there was a tremendous conflict that resulted in the forced resignation of the Dean. I wasn’t there so I don’t really know what it was about, but I do know that they spent three years in deep and prayerful discernment under the gentle guidance of a wonderful retired bishop, who also had no dog in the fight, in order to get to a place where they could consider calling a new Dean. And even then, I’m not sure they’re completely past it. I heard one statistic that it takes ten to fifteen years for a community to recover from a conflict like that.

Jesus wants us to be healthy, living parts of his vine. He wants us to be spiritually productive in all of the ways he has laid out for us – caring for those in need, preaching the Gospel, and especially loving God and our neighbors. But if anything is blocking us from that health, either as individuals or as a community, we won’t thrive and we won’t be able to fulfill all that God has planned for our lives.

We have two more weeks before Pentecost and the start of Ordinary Time. Ordinary Time, or the Green Season, is a season of growth and renewal, and exploring ways to clear the distracting old vines out of our lives. We have help. We have the best vine grower in the universe. We are connected to – abiding in – the best vine. And we have the help and comfort of the Holy Spirit. But it’s our choice to live fully into God’s promises, or not.

Let us pray.

Gracious and loving Father,

Thank you for your care and love for us, your vine branches. Thank you for the gift of the eternal Vine, your Son. Help us to live in him as he does in us. And help us to identify and heal the hurts and distractions that are keeping us from being fruitful members of your vineyard and prune away that which doesn’t glorify you. In Jesus’ holy name we pray.

Amen.