



SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for Sunday, April 29, 2018

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

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Acts 8:26-40 | Psalm 22:24-30 | 1 John 4:7-21 | John 15:1-8

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

Finally, it has begun to feel like spring. Finally, in the 5th week of Easter, we can get outside, take the rakes and the loppers, set the garden to rights, and get the ground ready for growing new things. What shall it be? A new perennial bed? New shrubs? A vegetable plot in the back yard or the community garden? Fruit trees? How about a vine for that old trellis?

During the Easter season (in the northern hemisphere, at least) we make happy seasonal analogies between new growth and new birth, between the reappearance of spring flowers and resurrection from the dead. Hearing that we're going to have the reading in which Jesus says "I am the vine, you are the branches" we expect happy talk about connectedness and fruitfulness, joy in growing things, a pretty picture of wine country. That's not exactly what Jesus is doing. For one thing, he didn't live in a place with tulips and forsythia. For another, in choosing a vine as his metaphor, he draws connections to our lives that are much tougher and more realistic than "the flowers that bloom in the spring, tra-la!"

The vintner in Jesus' extended metaphor is busy. Like us in our yards this week, he's out in the vineyard examining the vines to see what's healthy and what's not. He cleans out everything that's withered and dead. At the end of the day he has full stacks of winter detritus and dead branches to send to the curb for burning. The colors of his work are brown and grey and black, not green and pink and yellow. But it's not just the dead wood that he clears: the vintner cuts off bits of living branches to make them more fruitful than before. That's a scary part of this metaphor for me, since I don't know much about pruning and I'm afraid I'll cut off those primary canes that were all set to bear raspberries in June. I do know that it's possible to kill a whole fruit tree with over-vigorous pruning. Pruning is a frightfully responsible task. Aren't we glad it's God who does it?

If it's scary to prune things, it's even scarier to face being pruned. Yet we all do face pruning. We all have dead wood that needs to come out of our lives: old resentments, fears that paralyze us, and prejudices we hardly even notice. But

even our good, growing, vibrant parts need care so that they can grow more, have more lustrous blooms, and bear sweeter fruit. Even that kind of change is scary: how much of me does God want to change?

Jesus reassures us that we are rooted in God. We are the branches or shoots coming out of the main vine that is Jesus. Our life comes from him and remains in him, drawing its life force from Jesus' roots. How many times in this passage does Jesus encourage us to abide or remain in him! We love because he first loved us, says John: our source is in Jesus, and our ongoing life comes from him. We continually draw fresh life, strength, and nourishment from Jesus. Without that source, of course we can do nothing: separated from the source of life we wither and decay; whatever parts of our life are not rooted in Jesus' love will in themselves wither and decay. We can allow those parts to be cleaned out without being afraid of losing our essential being, which has its life in Jesus' own life.

John, in the epistle, tells us this same good news. God loves us, he says, and we know this because God sent his Son for us both to bridge the gap between us and God and to ground us in God's love. So we live in that love and can share it with others. John's repetitive, almost incantatory words say over & over: it all starts with God's love and stays with God's love. In seven verses John uses the word "love" 15 times. We live in God's love, grow in God's love, and bear fruit in God's love. How do we do that? Both John and Jesus answer the same way: if we stay near to Jesus in his words and share God's love with each other, we know and enjoy God's presence.

God's presence and love alleviate our fears of judgment of various kinds. We may fear the judgment that leads to punishment: most of us know that we cannot bear the holy light of God's truth which exposes our darkest thoughts and our most shameful deeds. John tells us that Jesus has put paid to all that on the cross and brought us into a new life in God. But we may also fear that judgment that brings criticism, that says "this and this and this need to change in your life." Much of the talk in our culture about acceptance suggests that because God takes us where we are and indeed loves us where we are, that we need not go any farther. To suggest a need for change seems to compromise the quality of the love. It is true that

God loved us first, before we ever thought of loving God, that God gave himself for us out of sheer love. But God's love is not just warm feelings: it is intention and will; it is living and active, moving us from death to life; it seeks our growth until we are all becoming our best selves, the fruitful vines that spread God's love all around.

John says this repeatedly: God loves us, we know God loves us, so we may share God's love. In fact, John goes farther: we only know and share in God's love when we share it with others. John flips the framework to make this explicit: what happens when we're not loving each other? Then we're not loving God either, says John. We cannot love God whom we cannot see if we're not loving our neighbor whom we can see. That doesn't mean warm, soft feelings: the love of God we share is that intention, that drive for the other person's best. Not that we get to take out our loppers and prune the other person in our critical judgments! Oh no! That is God's work alone. We are called to share the love of God as we have received it: striving for the other's benefit at our own cost. In love we constantly seek whatever will foster growth in the other person.

Jesus promises us an astonishing consequence of living in his love: God will be glorified by the fruit we bear. How can this be? How can the tiny little buds of love showing their tips on my branch give any extra glory to the God who is the source of all love? Well, the word glory has to do with reputation. In that sense it is fairly easy to see how our love, or lack of it, might affect God's reputation. If we flip the scenario, the results become painfully obvious: when Christians fail to love, God's reputation suffers. We see that all over the world today. Yet we can flip it back: we have countless opportunities to show love to others and so build God's reputation and give glory to God. That is astonishing.

Is that scary too? Does it look like more than we could ever hope to do? Again Jesus reassures us: abiding in him we draw our life from that inexhaustible source of love, the true vine. And Jesus reassures us that this is an on-going process of growth: God is glorified as we bear fruit and become his disciples. When Jesus said that to his friends, they had already been his disciples for some time; he implies that there is a sense in which we are always becoming his disciples. We are always being rooted in him, always growing into new lengths and depths of being his, always discovering new ways of following him. We can always grow, always become what God wants us to be. "So, beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God."

Amen.