

May 2, 2021

Prelude

Welcome and Announcements

***Call to Worship**

I am the vine, you are the branches, says the Lord.

Jesus said, “No one comes to the Father except through me.”

***Prayer of the Day**

O God, form the hearts of your people into a single will.

Make us love what you command and desire what you promise,

that amid all the changes of this world, our hearts may be fixed where joy is found,

through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Hymn Be Thou My Vision

*These stanzas are selected from a 20th century English poetic version of an
Irish monastic prayer dating to the 10th century or before.*

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
naught be all else to me save that thou art.
Thou my best thought, by day or by night;
waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.

Be thou my wisdom, and thou my true Word;
I ever with thee and thou with me Lord;
thou my soul's shelter, and thou my high tower;
raise thou me heavenward, O Power of my power.

Riches I heed not, nor vain empty praise;
thou mine inheritance, now and always;
thou and thou only, first in my heart;
High King of Heaven, my treasure thou art.

High King of Heaven, my victory won;
may I reach heaven's joys, O bright heaven's Sun!
Heart of mine own heart, whatever befall;
still be my vision, O Ruler of all.

Prayer of Confession

Holy and merciful God,

in your presence, we confess our failure to be what you created us to be.

**You alone know how often we have sinned in wandering from your ways,
in wasting your gifts, in forgetting your love.
By your mercy, help us live in your light and walk in your ways,
for the sake of Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.**

Response

Take, O take me as I am; summon out what I shall be.
Set your seal upon my heart and live in me. Repeat.

Assurance of Pardon

The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting.
Believe the good news of the gospel:
our sins are forgiven. Be at peace.

Time for Young Believers

Prayer of Illumination

Scripture Reading John 15:1-8

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit, Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

Response The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

The Morning Message

If you drive by our house right now you will likely see two un-ruly, un-pruned, wild-looking bushes. Now that the pretty yellow blooms are gone, you may not even recognize them as forsythia.

We planted the bushes at least twenty-five years ago. They thrived. Generous yellow blooms every spring. I would clip some and stand them in my favorite Blenko vase. Those tall straight branches heralded the arrival of spring. Warm, sunny days would soon follow. Negotiations with

our kids would resume about when it was time to come inside for the day, for they all loved to play outside.

But, after a few seasons when we failed to trim, rake, and clean up the ground beneath and around the forsythia, they are now a mess. The branches are so long they rake at our bedroom window on the second floor. They sound like someone is scratching on the window screen when the wind whips up. One day I noticed a sweet smell coming from the direction of the forsythia and upon inspection, realized that honeysuckle had wound its way into the bushes. And then, much to our dismay, the honeysuckle was joined by poison ivy. Like I said...it's a mess.

It's safe to say we know just a little about how vines and branches grow due to the neglect we've shown ours. To frame it in theological language, we could call this a sin of omission.

The vine is one of Jesus' favorite images for himself and his followers. We interpret the vine of which he speaks as a grape vine, for scripture is full of references to wine, the fruit of the vine.

Jesus uses this image to demonstrate the closeness of the relationship he has with his disciples. The lives are inter-dependent, inter-twined. Jesus also uses this image to demonstrate his relationship with God, whom he calls, "Father."

I don't know much about planting or tending a vineyard, but, from what I have learned, in order to reproduce grapes to type, a vine is grafted onto a strong root-stock so that two plants, in effect, become one. The root-stock grows deep in the ground where it extracts nutrients. Branches sprout from the main root, and in turn, this sprouts leaves and tendrils.

All this growth may be a joy to behold, but if the branches are left to themselves, they will grow and grow with abandon. The growth may continue at the expense of any fruit coming on the vine. The plant is so busy sending energy and nutrients to the farthest point on the vine, it bypasses any existing fruit, essentially starving it.

So, an important task of the vine-dresser is to prune, prune, prune, the vine, taking it all the way down to the nub if necessary. The energy has to be directed to the emerging fruit and not the foliage. The remaining branches that are not bearing fruit are also removed in order that the grapes closest to the vine will thrive.

If we think of this in human terms, we might say that, from time to time, we, too, need to be pruned. Churches may need to be pruned. Now, this may not be pleasant, or scheduled, or expected. But, life hands us changes and challenges. We have to adapt. Preferably, we will engage in a little self-examination to inform those changes. Hopefully, we will identify our strengths and weaknesses. Maybe we will set new priorities or goals. We may examine our

resources, financial and human, that are necessary for living out our call. Sometimes, we may even sense that we are being called away from an earlier purpose and into a new one.

One of the mixed blessings of this pandemic is that it has forced this and all churches to figure out what is essential for our lives. A week or two into the pandemic, the church where a friend and colleague of mine is senior minister, published a full schedule, 24/7, of meetings, Bible studies, support groups, Sunday School, Circle meetings, outreach plans, community engagements. They had decided early on that the show must go on. No hiccups. And it worked, for awhile. Then fatigue set in. They needed more help, more leadership. They needed more tech-savvy volunteers to keep up. Everyone was stretched to their limit. All in an effort to defy the notion that an international health crisis had the world in its tight grip. Having a full, elaborate schedule gave a sense of security, in my view, a false sense of security, that the church wasn't affected by the pandemic.

Most of us took a less-strenuous and more rational approach. Worship, pastoral care, simplified outreach, stewardship in order to stay afloat. Transitioning from traditional worship to worship presented electronically has been a big challenge. It has been a steep learning curve for me, if not for others. From what we have heard, offering an alternative to in-person worship was a good decision.

The important thing, to me, is to do as this scripture text directs: abide in Jesus. One translation for the word "abide" means "to make our home with" Jesus. When we make our home with Jesus, we become intimately related. We know each other's routines and habits. Conversation becomes more familiar and less formal. At times, there is no need for words. Scripture tells us that God knows our thoughts even before the words are formed on our lips. What has been on your mind already today? Joy? Hope? Concern? Jesus already knows. That is the product of abiding in him.

In her blog, Suzanne Guthrie writes that Jesus's teaching about the vine helps her not to panic in what can be a stressful, demanding culture, but to live into the perspective of our connectedness to one another and to the Holy One. This gospel reading of the vine and the branches "reminds me that I am not only in community with other people and that I am inseparably grafted to the vine-the source of my deep and enduring happiness and love."

Catherine of Sienna, several centuries ago, had this to say about the passage: "keep in mind that each of you has your own vineyard. But everyone is joined to the neighbor's vineyards without any dividing lines. They are so joined together, in fact, that you cannot do good or evil for yourself without doing the same for your neighbors."

Think about that. How different would the world be if we all shared that understanding of connectedness?

There is a Jewish story that says when we are created, we are tied to God with a string. When we sin, the string breaks. But, on the Day of Atonement, the angel Gabriel arrives from heaven to tie a knot in our string, putting it back together. After a lifetime of this, the string will be full of knots at the broken places in our lives.

And the string will be shorter than it was when we were created, demonstrating our ever-closer relationship to God.

May it be so for all of us. Amen.

***Affirmation of Faith** The Apostles' Creed
**I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried.
He descended into hell.
The third day he rose again from the dead,
he ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God, the Father, Almighty,
from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.**

Ascription of Praise

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost.
As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be.
World without end. Amen. Amen.

Joys and Concerns of the Church

Pastoral Prayer and the Lord's Prayer

Presenting Our Tithes and Offerings *Please place your offering in the plates on the Communion table at any time. There is also a container for the Cents and Sensibility Offering.*

***Blessing**

Just as God's Word was sent into the world to heal and redeem,
so God sends you into the world this day
to be light and love, healing and hope.

Go now, and share the good news generously,
and may the grace of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be with you today and always. Amen.

***Postlude**

Announcements

Elder of the Month

The session will meet May 16 following worship.

We want to celebrate your good news! Please send notice of graduations and other milestones to
Jessica Kidd at