

Worship for October 8, 2023

Prelude

***Call to Worship**

Shine like stars in the world,
holding fast to the word of life.

***Prayer of the Day**

**Lord, tireless guardian of your people,
Ever-prepared to hear the cries of your chosen ones,
teach us to rely, day and night, on your care.
Support our prayer, lest we grow weary,
drive us to seek your enduring justice and your ever-present help.
Grant this through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

***Hymn 157 I Danced in the Morning, verses 1,2, and 3**

Prayer of Confession

**Holy and merciful God,
in your presence we confess our sinfulness, our shortcomings,
and our offenses against you.
You alone know how often we have sinned
in wandering from your ways,
in wasting your gifts,
in forgetting your love.
Have mercy on us, Lord,
for we are sorry for all we have done to displease you.
Forgive us our sins and help us to live in your light,
and walk in your ways,
for the sake of Jesus Christ our Savior.**

***Hymn Take, O Take Me As I Am**

Assurance of Forgiveness

Hear the good news!
Who is in a position to condemn?
Only Christ, and Christ died for us,
Christ rose for us,
Christ reigns in power for us,

Christ prays for us.
Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation.
The old life is gone and a new life has begun.
Know you are forgiven and be at peace. Amen.

First Reading Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Moments With Our Young Disciples

Gospel Reading Matthew 21:33-46

Morning Message

In years past, if you would drive by our house, you would have seen two unruly, un-pruned, wild-looking bushes on the lefthand side of our yard. If the pretty yellow blooms were gone, you may not even have recognized 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 became a mess. The branches were so long they raked at our bedroom window on the second floor. They sounded like someone 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 was a hot mess. And eventually, we had to remove them. It was an ordeal.

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. We failed to adequately care for what was entrusted to us.

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 used this image to demonstrate the closeness of the relationship he has with his disciples. Their 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.

The first time I saw a vineyard was traveling through New York state in the dead of winter. A group of us was driving to Toronto for a conference. We passed acres and acres of grape arbors topped with thick, dark vines, silhouetted against the winter sky. You could see the orderliness of the whole system and I wondered how it would feel to watch it transform with the seasons.

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.

The Presbytery of West Virginia is in such a time right now. The Leadership Team is calling people together for table-talk meetings, to seek God's direction in shaping the church's future. We will host one such event here on October 29th.

One of the mixed blessings of the pandemic was that it 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. They tried to hire me! 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 the church staff and congregation 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' 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.

*Hymn I Danced in the Morning, verses 4 and 5

*Affirmation of Faith p. 35

*Hymn 581 Gloria Patri

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer and the Lord's Prayer

Presenting Our Tithes and Offerings

Offertory

*Hymn 607 Doxology

*Prayer of Dedication

*Hymn 720 Jesus Calls Us

*Blessing

Go now and continue in what you have learned and believed.

Pray always, and do not lose heart.

Proclaim God's message,

endure hostility,

carry out your ministry fully.

And may God be quick to answer your prayers,

may Christ Jesus inspire faith within you,

and may the Holy Spirit tutor your hearts and equip you for every good work.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. Amen.

*Postlude