

5 Easter, Year B
Sunday, May 10, 2009
John 15: 1-8

I. The Challenge of Living in Christian Community and its relation to the Gospel

- Parish meeting-beneficial to hear from one another, to hear the voice of the other, to begin to see things less in terms of right and wrong but to realize instead that each of us is right on his or her own account-it is less the case in the Church that we are in the difficult position of choosing between a good and bad option but instead we are having to choose between goods.
- Meeting also illustrative of the reality that life in Christian community is challenging precisely for this very reason: How do we reconcile the many different voices and feelings and needs while maintaining unity? How do we avoid win-lose situations when clearly as the body nothing we do together will seem best to all involved?
- Dilemma further complicated by our depriving ourselves of the rich NT language regarding the sacramental nature of the Church and its mission, meaning that rather than relying on what the Scriptures have to say about us and what we are about, we define ourselves in terms of the world's language, whether that be consumer oriented, political, etc. The result is that we become confused about our identity as the body of Christ and less able to work through the inevitable challenges and struggles of ecclesial life.

- A great and timely blessing then that John's Gospel offers us a rich and fruitful (a deliberate use of that word) image to help us understand who we are in relation to Jesus Christ and to one another.

II. The True Vine and the Vine-grower

- Jesus has just spoken to his disciples about his departure and his gift of the Spirit, and now he is giving them instructions about how to live as a community in the wake of his absence from them. In John 15, Jesus tells a story which functions in a similar manner to those of the parables in the synoptic Gospels, and he relies on the connected images of the true vine, the Vine-grower, and the branches.
- Worth saying that this image would have been quite relevant to his audience-consider the wealth of OT Scriptures referring to Israel as the vine. In the Temple of Herod the Great there was even a massive golden vine on the doors that divided the porch from the Holy Place, and the Temple doors were typically left open at night during the Passover season. Some have suggested that as Jesus leads the disciples out of the upper room in the upper city he is pointing to this vine as he is preaching to his disciples that he is in fact the true vine.
- From the beginning of his discourse, Jesus calls the disciples attention to his intimate connection with the

Father, and focuses on what God accomplishes in us through Jesus.

- The Father, Jesus says, is the vine-grower who both removes every branch from the true vine, meaning Jesus, which bears no fruit and prunes those vines which do bear fruit so that they can bear even more fruit.
- God is the caretaker of the true vine and is ultimately responsible for the fruit-bearing of the branches.
- Because of God's presence in Jesus, the Gospel tells us, we have already been cleansed, which is to say that through Christ, as his branches, we are pruned or empowered by God to bear much fruit.

III. Abiding in the Vine

- And here Jesus begins to talk about the importance of abiding in him, as he is the true vine whose fruitfulness is a result of the Father's love which is in him.
- "Abide in me as I abide in you." The branches, Jesus says, cannot bear fruit apart from the vine, meaning that as the body of Christ, we do not truly live faithfully as the Church and less we remain in the love of Christ, which is the love of the Father, and unless we allow that same love to abide in us and make us fruitful.

- Another way to say that is unless we exist as a body penetrated through and through by the love of Christ, which is the Father's love and which is ours through the Spirit, we cannot bear fruit with and for one another. This means that no decision, no ministry, no mission endeavor will be fruitful unless it is filled with the loving presence of God and unless accepts that loving presence as authoritative.
- Jesus tells us that as we abide in him and he in us, we come to experience the Trinitarian love of Father, Son, and Spirit in our lives and in our community, a love without which we can accomplish nothing.
- It is the loving communion of the Holy Trinity, in fact, which is the true pattern for our love for one another, as Father, Son, and Spirit live in relationship of eternal love and self-giving, fully equal yet in a way in which their difference and particularity are not compromised. And through our abiding in this pattern of love we come to see how for us, the Body of Christ, giving of ourselves in sacrificial love and the authentic differences we experience with our neighbor need not be at odds.
- God, Jesus says, is in fact glorified when we bear fruit and become his disciples, meaning when we live with one another in such a way that our mutual relationships lead not to the assertion of one's needs over the other but in such a way that our actions lead to the fruit-bearing of each member of the Body.

IV. The Church's Life and the True Vine

- I want to suggest this morning, in light of this powerful image, that as the Church we are only fruitful when we abide in Christ who is the true vine. Something powerful and liberating is offered to us in these words of Christ, to which we should pay great attention.
- In the first place, we hear in Jesus' words that as the branches of the true vine, we are measured by God, the vine-grower only in terms of the fruit we bear, and since, in essence, one vine cannot bear fruit without another, the interests of one member of the body are never more important than those of another. We are called not to reconcile different agendas, but rather to offer ourselves to one another in such a way that we make it possible for one another to bear fruit.
- Secondly, and this is perhaps where it gets most challenging, Jesus' words call us back to the reality that we are one body, that we worship, work, and pray together as the Church, not primarily because we chose one another, or even because Church fulfills our needs, but because we are the branches connected to the true vine who has in turn called us into communion and relationship with one another for the sake of his love for the world.
- And this means, brothers and sisters, that we could not choose to separate ourselves from one another even if we wanted to.

- Sure, we can leave in anger, choose other churches or denominations, withdraw from the body, in extreme and tragic cases we can even become toxic and stifling to the other branches, but sooner or later, we are confronted with the reality that if we are in Christ Jesus, we cannot separate ourselves from the true vine and thus from one another.
- Finally, I want to hold up to you this morning that what Jesus is offering us in this Gospel is liberation from the isolation of individualism, privatism, and consumerism, all of which detrimentally affect the life of the Church, which is yet again why it is so important for us to reclaim for ourselves the rich ecclesial language of the NT.
- All taught to be self-reliant, to seek our own ends, that when the interests of others push up against our own we are to push back, to assert our own way when we are in conflict with another, to seek other communities when we are unhappy with the ones we have.
- But true life is found not in these ways of thinking and being, but in our connectedness to one another and to the true vine Jesus Christ. We might appropriately think of the vine imagery in terms of own observations of how vines behave, the way that branches and vines are intertwined.
- At times they seem disorganized, chaotic, even in conflict with one another, and yet their mutual survival and thriving

stems form the same source, just as ours stems only from Jesus Christ.

V. The image of one cup, an invitation to see ourselves once again as branches of the one true vine.

- Come here week to week, even in the midst of conflict and disagreement, and share that meal, and yet how often we forget the extent to which it binds us together as branches of the true vine. How often we fail to remember that our partaking of the one bread, one cup, means that we live no longer for ourselves alone, but in Christ Jesus, which means that share in one another irrevocably and abidingly.

Let us partake of that one cup, remember that it is where our life is found, and let us through the Love of God in Christ and through the Spirit be fruitful in our common life together.

Amen.