

5 Easter B. May 2, 2021.  
The Rev. Deborah Woolsey.

**Spring Green**  
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

It seems everywhere I look in Athens, Ohio right now I see examples of vines and branches growing. The steep hillsides are the bright green of spring as trees leaf out with the promise of more life to come this summer. So perhaps it is fitting today that we are given Jesus' words from John's Gospel about vines, branches, and vine growers during the vibrant green of springtime.

Jesus' words in today's Gospel reading are a very short portion of a much longer speech scholars call Jesus' Farewell Discourse the author of John's Gospel had Jesus give before his crucifixion, death, and resurrection. The whole speech is long; it goes on and on for several chapters in John's Gospel. The purpose of this speech, which only occurs in John's Gospel, might be to help those of us reading or listening to it gain insight or understanding to the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection. This is why the the members of the church who put together our Sunday readings chose to give us this part of the speech during the Easter Season. The resurrection of Jesus isn't just one day of celebration, it is the heart and soul of what it means to be his follower as individuals and in a community as interconnected as vines and branches.

As we begin to reflect on today's Gospel, it's important not to look at Jesus' metaphor literally or we might be tempted to put ourselves in the role of pruner, which Jesus said is God's role, as we might think of branches as people or programs and start pruning away. That is not what Jesus, nor the author of John's Gospel had in mind when Jesus said he is the true vine and God is the vine grower. Jesus may not be making a literal comparison when he said his followers were branches, instead he described the interconnectedness between vines and branches and the ultimate purpose of the whole plant.

When considering Jesus' vine metaphor we need to remember what we learned in biology class about plants. Simply put: Plants like trees, flowers, and vines all bring nutrients and water from the soil to the leaves. Through a process called photosynthesis the leaves send energy back through the vine/stem/trunk into the roots to help the plant grow stronger and aids in the production of fruit and seeds. It's a reciprocal relationship which is perhaps what is at the heart of Jesus' metaphor.

When Jesus referred to himself as the true vine, he might have been suggesting those who follow him are to be nourished by his word, example, and community, however we might attach ourselves to him. But our purpose isn't just to feed off of Jesus like a parasite, we are to be in a relationship where we contribute to and participate in the life and vitality of the whole.

Here's an example from my life. Before I could be ordained a priest, I had to attend a three-year academic and religious formation program called seminary. There are eleven Episcopal seminaries in the United States. The one I attended is conservative; so much

so several of my fellow students didn't think I belonged there because of my gender, as they believed only men can be priests. Sometimes these students gave me a very hard time, to the extent that I became angry. Part of my seminary experience was all students and faculty had to attend community prayer services together twice a day. Sometimes, especially after an extremely hard day, I struggled to pray. Some days it was so bad I couldn't open up my prayer book. The best I could do was be in the chapel at my place. However, on those days, I never felt left out of the service. Instead I felt carried along by those who were able to pray that day. And here is the part that I think is so cool: the same people who had hurt and angered me earlier that day were the same ones whose prayers were carrying me along. That means it is entirely possible there had been days when they had trouble praying and I had been part of the community that had carried them. This is how God works through us regardless of what we think of each other and it's how God creates Beloved Community or God's Kingdom of Heaven here on earth. That kingdom or community doesn't only consist of people we like or who think the same way we do. But that doesn't have to be a problem for God who can bind that community together through God's love and our willingness to let God's love flow through us.

That's why we have to be careful with the part of the metaphor about pruning branches and remember God is the vine grower, not us. Our role in the relationship is to participate as best we can, which sometimes means we play an active role, and other times we let others carry us. Because the ultimate purpose of the relationship isn't growth for its own sake, it is, as Jesus said, to become disciples or followers of Jesus.

One of our parishioners here at Church of the Good Shepherd has taken on the ancient practice of cultivating grape vines in order to make wine. In so doing, he is participating in an industry that is thousands of years old and I love to listen when he talks about his vineyard and how much work it is planting, tending, protecting, watering, and pruning his grape vines. I don't hear much about harvesting fruit. I do hear a lot about what he is learning. And he constantly reminds me when talking about the intense labor he is investing in his vineyard is that he isn't doing all that work to grow grapes. His intention is to make wine. Grapes are just a step in the process. They are important, but not the ultimate purpose.

I wonder if some well-intended scholars, commentators, and preachers have interpreted Jesus' vine metaphor as we are good disciples or followers of Jesus only when we produce lots of fruit, which happens when we get more people to attend church and give more money. But I'm not sure Jesus was into consumerism, as such an interpretation sounds like possibly dehumanizing people as only having value as high attendance numbers. Maybe the fruit production Jesus was referring to wasn't more people, but the entire process of making wine. Maybe it's about connection, giving and receiving, letting go, changing, and remembering what grounds us. Maybe that is what religion is intended to be.

In a recent essay, author, Episcopalian, and speaker Diana Butler Bass wrote about how the pandemic has changed her from someone who pontificated about the future of

the church to someone who now humbly admits she doesn't know what the future of the church will be like. She wrote about the loss the pandemic brought; loss of lives, employment, businesses and how the pandemic showed her not everything that was lost was permanent. Sometimes lost means something can be found or restored. This brought to mind the word *religion* which we may think of as having a rigid meaning: ritual, doctrine, polity, or duty. Diana Butler Bass reminds us the word *religion* comes from the Latin root *religare* which means *bind or reconnect*. She suggests that while she can't fathom what the church might look like in the future, today the church could respond to its reality by recognizing what has been lost, broken, or is hurting and do the work of binding what has been broken and restoring what has been lost or misplaced. This might be the wine we are to produce as followers of Jesus.

This isn't work of only a priest, or the senior warden, or the vestry. And she isn't talking about returning to in-person parish life the way it was before the pandemic. Diana Butler Bass is talking about the exact opposite of going backward. She's talking about the labor of going forward into a reality that has been changed whether or not we like that change. It's work for the whole Body of Christ, the whole church. Which might look more like those prayer services at seminary where we carry each other and the labor we need to invest in is the labor of forgiveness, compassion, of turning away from greed and that which harms ourselves and others and turning toward Christ, to seeing each other not as competitors but fellow participants in the community. And recognizing the purpose of religion isn't to spiritually feed or please people as part of some consumer enterprise, but to participate in healing the divides us and cultivate relationships that are rooted in God's love.

So as we look at the beauty springing up around us, maybe it can serve as a reminder and inspiration of the Beloved Community we are already connected to and called to be part of, to share, and to let the world see and know how beautiful Jesus' Way of Love: the practice of prayer, of turning to God, learning, being a blessing, worshiping, and going into our community in person and on line, and resting in God's love can be.