



5th Sunday of Easter

Sermon by Revd Sharmain James



28 April 2024

READINGS

Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22:26-32; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

“I am the vine and you are the branches.”

We are living in the most technologically connected period in human history. Nearly everyone owns a smartphone – has access to a laptop, iPad or tablet, a TV, that gives us instant access to the rest of the world. Many create and sustain friendships through Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and other internet resources that bring people together from around the world.

For churches, maintaining a close connection with members is a must-have. Here at St Michaels, we are using various ways to stay connected - online worship, weekly letters via email. A small group of us connect every week to pray for the needs of others via zoom. We depend so much on internet connection - that a world without the internet is unimaginable.

In today's gospel reading from John 15 Jesus gives us a divine angle to connection using the relationship between a vine and its branches. Even though we are five weeks into the Easter season – In today's passage, Jesus is hours away from his death. He is having an intimate conversation with his closest friends, the twelve disciples. Through this conversation Jesus paints a picture of a vine with branches that bear fruit. Jesus says: “I am the vine and you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in them will bear much because without me you can do nothing”.

The grapevine was an important symbol for Israel throughout their history. Some of the accounts in scripture relate to Israel being God's vineyard and not producing the fruit which was expected. It was the winemaker's job to do some pruning and replacing, which is what the prophets saw the exile as being all about. Later, God would replant the vineyard with a new stock and that new vine, the “true vine. That would be Jesus himself who embodied the new Israel, God's Chosen One, the One through whom the whole world would be saved and blessed.

Because - Israel failed to produce the fruit expected - Jesus said: “I am the reality. “ - I am the vine. But not only that, he includes the Father as the vinedresser. - Jesus does not stand alone in the metaphor being used. His Father is intimately involved in all that goes on with Jesus being the vine. Jesus wants us to know that he and the Father are on the same page. After Jesus lets us know who he is. He then has something to say about who we are. He says - WE are the branches. Using the image of “branches” – Jesus relates that - Our truest identity is only found in him.

Beyond the material connection lies our connection with Jesus. Jesus is our ultimate connection. Without him all connections fail. In the passage – Jesus says: - remain in me and I will remain in you. Jesus used the word remain or abide eleven times in this chapter. How does a branch draw life from the stem? It is the sap rising from the roots through the stem which supplies the branches. We have all seen a branch broken off a tree – the leaves wither, the wood dies, it dries out. So Jesus said - “If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit. The quality of the fruit thus depends on the branches’ connectedness to the vine itself. So what might the fruit look like that God desires from us?

I think that the sort of fruit Jesus is looking for is people’s lives being transformed by the power of the Gospel. People being saved and set on the road to eternity. People being loved and cared for, having God’s love showered over them. That fruit is people being made disciples, being led and taught and encouraged to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Follow the teachings of Jesus, Becoming Christ-like in every aspect of their lives.

The fruit God is looking for is a changed world, - free from war, reformed from greed and selfishness and things that hurt and destroy. The fruit is the Kingdom of God, - a world of love, peace and forgiveness – that’s the sort of fruit. It is fruit which is nourishing. Jesus also says in the passage: “Anyone who does not remain in me will be thrown out like a branch and wither. The vinedresser does not allow for any existence in the vine that is not a real existence as a branch connected to the vine.

So when we try to live our lives without Him, we lose all our power, energy, and we in essence die. Obviously we don’t curl up and die a few days later. Jesus is our source of life and there is nothing outside that relationship that adds up to anything other than withered branches, burned out and burned up. Jesus wants us to know that there is no “true” life outside of a relationship with the “true” vine. Your effectiveness as a Christian - comes from your connection to Jesus. How do we BEST stay connected to the “true vine”?

The reading from John’s First Epistle covers parallel ground. Take verse 15-16 for example. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. Just like the sap rising from the roots through the stem which supplies the branches. So also the love of God is like the sap which flows to the branches? Receiving the love of God is life giving to us. At the same time, God expects us to allow that love to flow on through us to others.

We live in a world that is so very fragmented but the church can be a place where togetherness is emphasized and worked at, because Christ draws us together in his love. We are more together, in Christ, than apart and on our own. We know that in the love and faithfulness of Christ we will be drawn together in that love and seek to draw others to this place and into his love. Let us remain connected and strive always to be true branches of the true vine. We achieve this through our faithful prayers and intentional love.

As we go into this week may God’s love abide with us to remain intimately connected to the true vine every day of our lives. Amen