

Easter 5, YrB, 050612

All Saints Episcopal Church

I am the vine, you are the branches. Abide in me, as I abide in you.

In the name of the one God. Amen.

Last week, Jim introduced the Gospel lesson as the first of a series of "I AM" statements found in John -- the first being 'I am the good Shepherd.' Then he told us that, contrary to what most of us have heard over the years - even though the words aren't literally there that say 'I am the good shepherd and you are the sheep,' that's what has been preached to us -- so he said that when we hear Jesus say 'I am,' it means 'We are.' Therefore, instead of hearing 'I am the good shepherd and you are the sheep,' we should hear 'We are the good shepherd,' 'We lay down our lives for the sheep.' So, in the various readings from John, we hear, in effect, that we are the door, we are the bread, we are the gate, we are the vine.

Almost all of these metaphors seem to be ones that call us to action. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep, tends and cares for them, brings them to safety. The door opens up to provide hospitality, dignity and welcome to those who come. The bread provides nurture, broken for the world. The gate offers care and safety for all who go through it.

I get those things. It is possible to imagine doing the things that Jesus does for those who are the last, the least and the lost.

But, here's the deal about today's Gospel lesson: In this part of John, the words actually say, 'I am the vine, you are the branches.' So are we the vine AND the branches? Probably so, but it is confusing. And to top it off, being either vine OR branches is pretty passive rather than active. I don't know if you've ever had a vegetable garden or not, but it's not exactly an action-packed adventure! Watching and waiting for plants to grow, to mature, to produce the tomato, the squash, or the bell pepper takes a lot of patience at the very least, or an incredible interest in minute detail!

This is the third year that we have a garden at our house. There are several different raised beds in which a variety of things are growing. As we have become more knowledgeable about what does well and more clear about what we want to eat and how much of it is enough, we have adapted the configuration of the beds and changed the types of plants we grow.

One plant that we have had since the first summer is a grape vine. Mind you, it is only a couple of feet tall and hasn't made any grapes yet, but we haven't given up on it! Before this year, there were only a few leaves on it from time to time, and last winter it looked like it might have bit the dust altogether. But this year it is full of lush, bright green leaves - a sure sign of hope.

One of the things that struck me about today's lesson and the garden, is the idea of pruning back whatever part of the plant is not producing or keeps the plant from producing. A long time ago, my daddy taught me that when you have tomato plants, you have pick off the little 'suckers' that grow up in between 2 branches; if you don't, the plant's nutrients are directed toward the suckers instead of toward the tomatoes themselves. Likewise, Jesus says if a branch isn't producing, it is cut off and thrown into the fire.

Now please note that this is not a statement about our sinfulness or our disobedience. It's just a statement about what is. Branches need to be pruned in order for the plant to produce more fruit, more blossoms, more branches that will grow strong - whatever the object of the pruning is. They are thrown into a pile of deadwood and put on the curb for the trash pickup to take them wherever they take them. But this is not a statement about punishment.

What Jesus does talk about at the same time he talks about cutting away the dead branches is 'abiding.' Now, I'm sure he didn't mean what we mean when we say, "Oh, that's awful! I can't abide it!" In that case the meaning is to tolerate, withstand, put up with, as in "I can't stand it!" No. What it means in this context is to 'dwell.' Perhaps hearing the translation in "The Message" helps this word make better sense:

1-3 "I am the Real Vine and my Father is the Farmer. He cuts off every branch of me that doesn't bear grapes. And every branch that is grape-bearing he prunes back so it will bear even more. You are already pruned back by the message I have spoken.

4"Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you. In the same way that a branch can't bear grapes by itself but only by being joined to the vine, you

can't bear fruit unless you are joined with me.

5-8"I am the Vine, you are the branches. When you're joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant. Separated, you can't produce a thing. Anyone who separates from me is deadwood, gathered up and thrown on the bonfire. But if you make yourselves at home with me and my words are at home in you, you can be sure that whatever you ask will be listened to and acted upon. This is how my Father shows who he is—when you produce grapes, when you mature as my disciples.

Jesus is urging the disciples to make their home in him as he makes his home in them. It is about their relationship with each other that will remain even as he leaves them. And that makes sense considering that they knew the human Jesus. But what about us? Do we know what abiding in Christ - making our home in him - would look like? Do we feel connected like branches to a vine to Jesus, to our congregation, or to anything at all? I would say that it is even more than just a connection we look for - it is a relationship, a real one. Jesus offers to his disciples, and to us, relationship, community, life in its abundance.

The difference for us between a connection and a relationship is that a connection is on the surface, superficial, shallow. 'Liking' someone on Facebook is good for having connections but it does not a relationship make - it is only a connection. A relationship means that we are free and able to be real, to be honest about who and what we are, even if that means admitting our faults. Jesus invites us to be honest, to be real and -- having confessed our hopes and fears, our dreams and disappointments, our accomplishments and failures, our blessing and our sin -- to know that we are accepted, loved, and forgiven. Jesus reveals, after all, the God who loves the whole world enough to send the Son.

Then, because we know about God's acceptance of us, because we are at home with God, we can turn to accept each other, living with the imperfections of even our best relationships and communities because we know ourselves to be imperfect and flawed and yet also loved.

So it is action after all that we take to produce growth as part of the vine. We help raise others to a life of dignity and honesty, and they help others, and so on and so forth. It is the community of the vine and the branches. So live at home in God because God is at home in you.