

April 28, 2024

“Jesus: A True Vine”

John 15:1-8

As I was preparing for today’s sermon, I came across a story about the oldest vine in the world. The grape variety of “zametovka” has been growing in Lent, Maribor, Slovenia for more than 400 years. It won a place in the Guinness Book of Records as the oldest vine in the world still bearing grapes. People in Maribor called it the Old Vine which was planted in front of a house towards the end of the Middle Ages when Maribor was facing Ottoman invasion. The Old Vine survived wars, parasites and fires. The vine’s resiliency and tenacity were partly due to its roots that were deep within the banks of the Drava river. This Old Vine yields a yearly harvest between 35 to 55 kilograms of grapes made into wine. The author concludes the story with these words: *“The story of our vine is also the story of incredible persistence, perseverance and the will to survive, which is nowadays particularly relevant. To make it easier for it to tell its story to the world, the vine has its own museum: The Old Vine House. It is the only grapevine in the world with its own museum!”*

Today’s reading in John portrays Jesus as a True Vine. But this is not the only metaphor fleshed out in this text. We also read God as the vine grower, the one who removes and trims unfruitful and healthy branches. And who are the branches? John says, we are! For those who are hardcore gardeners, you would probably agree that growing vines don’t care about personal space. It’s a messy, twisty, jumbly thing. It stretches, it spreads, and it invades. It grows in all kinds of tangled up directions, and its densely interwoven branches are just about vague from each other. Rev. Debie Thomas said that like grapevines, *“our spiritual lives are meant to be tangled up together. We are meant to live lives of profound interdependence, growing into, around, and out of each other. We cause pain and loss when we hold ourselves apart, because the fate of each individual branch affects the vine as a whole.”*

But there are words in this passage that gives me some discomfort. They sound to me like words of judgment: cleansed, cut off, remove, thrown away, burned, trimmed, pruned! They tell me that we need to undergo a painful transformation – that we need to experience sufferings or

pain or stresses in life or to cut us off from something, in order to be healthy and strong and to bear more fruits. But in John's theology and faith, these are necessary— the branches are trimmed or pruned in order to produce abundant leaves and flowers, even more luscious, delicious, healthy fruit.

The words pruning and trimming were used in translating the Greek word *kathairie*, which literally means to purge, to cleanse, or to cut off. Trimming is a more gentle, loving way of cutting off leaves and branches and twigs whereas pruning is a more tedious and harsher way of tending to the plants and trees. A horticulturist once explained that pruning is needed to prevent loose or dead branches from harming other plants and it allows flowers and fruit to flourish. Pruning is not meant to stunt growth, but to stimulate the plant or tree. The more you prune a grapevine, the more fruits it will produce. On the other hand, trimming is a way of tidying up a plant or a tree by removing overgrown branches. Excessive overgrowth is harmful since it reduces the amount of moisture and light a plant or tree receives, so trimming is also an important process. Pruning and trimming are both necessary in the growth of a plant or tree.

Trimming is a word that we often do in our lives whether we are aware of this consciously or unconsciously. A good example is weight or age. But there is another word that I think we need to trim: that word is “distraction”. We live in a society full of distractions. They most certainly can detract us from our growth, focus, and happiness, as well as sidetrack us from other new ideas or opportunities. We need to be careful not to let things or people take time away from areas where we could better use our time, focus, and energy. A quick survey shows that 59% of iPhone users check email the second it arrives, 83% check it while on vacation, and 53% even check it when they are in the bathroom. Some of us are distracted by work that we do not have quality time anymore with our children. And it's not just our children who are busy— simultaneously doing their online schooling, listening to music, playing video games and talking on the phone. It's also us, the grown ups who are unable to concentrate and stay focused as we suffer through one interruption after another.

As a faith community, there are lots of things that needs trimming or pruning in order to find our home in Jesus, the vine and God the vinegrower. There are resentments and anger and

indifferences that need to be cut off; inappropriate and hurtful words that should be eliminated; a “holier-than-thou attitude” that needs letting go or the “I am always right and you’re not” behaviour that affects relationships. As a faith community, we need to trim the old ways of doing things and to embrace a newer process that makes us refocus our energy. We need to let go of our old ways of having only the adults run the church and letting the younger ones be a part of the show. And how do we keep the young branches stay connected to the vine? One way to do this is to engage and integrate the children, youth and young adults in the life of the church. We need to listen to them and to give them opportunities to share their talents and gifts and to encourage them to create a space for their creativity and leadership to shine.

Strange as it seems, rather than this John passage being harsh, they are, in the long run, words of comfort and hope for us. They are words of wisdom to keep us on the right track. I think John used the metaphors of the vine, the vinegrower and the branches to remind us of what would actually happen when we are not connected to Jesus, our leader and model and his way of life. John would say - we end up cut off, withered, useless, like the branches and dead twigs that we clean up from our yard and thrown away or burn. But cutting away the dead growth is necessary for new life to take place. And being a follower of Jesus apparently doesn't spare us in the process. We are trimmed and pruned so that we may stay close to Jesus' agenda of love, justice and kindness, not wandering too far away like wild trailing branches, attaching ourselves to unnecessary things and resulting in a tangled mess of a life.

If Jesus is the vine and we are the branches, what do these metaphors mean for us? John says we have only one task: *to abide*. To hang in there for the long haul. To abide is to stay rooted in place. But it is also to grow, to change, and to multiply. If we abide, we'll get trimmed. We'll get pruned. If we abide, we'll bear fruit. If we abide, we'll have to accept nourishment that is not of our own making. If we abide, we will have to coexist with the other branches. We will have to live a life that is messy, crowded, tangled, and twisty. A life that's deeply rooted and also wildly fertile.

Abiding in Jesus the vine means admitting that we are not only independent, do-it-yourself people who can boast “I did it my way.” Abiding in Jesus means accepting that we are also

dependent on the vine, the vinegrower and the other branches. It means graciously receiving the nourishment the vine offers us but also consenting to being pruned by the vinegrower: to letting go of the things that hinder our growth, things like fear and hatred, greed and jealousy, grudges and resentment, shame and guilt, and all the other vine-y, branch-y tangly things that messes us up. By being tangled up and connected with the branches, we are able to connect with each other, in the words of Eugene Peterson, to become “intimate and organic”. Do we see our congregational life as abiding in Jesus, the vine and God as the vinegrower? Do we even know or think about what abiding would look like? And maybe that's the place to start – to what do we feel connected?

On this Earth Sunday, Jesus invites us to be real, to be honest about who and what we are, even if that means admitting that we need trimming or pruning to make us bear good fruit. We are not called to quietly continue as insignificant wandering branches but to respond to the needs of others and the world with authentic, holy love. The one who shapes our lives, God as the vinegrower, wills us to flourish and grow and to feed others from the strength we get from our relationship with Jesus, the true vine. Earth Day is a day to remember that we have only one planet and we, as stewards of the earth, must protect it. Let us remind ourselves that as branches of Jesus, the true vine, we are called to protect Mother Earth, our common home. Jesus said, “Those who abide in me and I in them will bear much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” We actually could turn that around and say, “Those who abide in Jesus, the true vine will bear much fruit, for with Jesus, everything is made new.” Amen.

Other sources that helped me in this sermon:

BCUC Lectionary Group

Debie Thomas, “Abide” Sermon on John 15: 1-8, 2018.

Rev. Dr. Ritva H. Williams, “I am the Vine, You are the Branches”, sermon on John 15: 1-8, 2015.