

The image of God as a vinegrower removing and pruning branches has led many people to infuse this Gospel reading with judgment and threat; to respond to this passage by identifying branches that they believe are not bearing fruit and that, consequently, deserve to be removed and thrown into the fire. There is some value to *self*-examination along those lines, but the practice is problematic when we direct that scrutiny at others. And, more importantly, I am persuaded that Jesus has something far more life-affirming in mind.

Our gospel reading for today is part of a lengthy teaching that John introduces with these words: “Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” Jesus then washes their feet at the Last Supper and promises the coming of the Holy Spirit. His teaching comes to an end with this prayer to God: “I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

My point is this: throughout this lengthy teaching called “the last discourse,” Jesus turns consistently to the theme of “abiding.” Now, the Greek root for the word “abide” means “to stay in a place,” “to hold out,” “to endure,” but I am drawn to the figurative meaning, which is “to remain in a sphere.”

In the passage we heard this morning, Jesus is using the image of the vine and branches to describe his relationship to the disciples. In the context of the Last Supper, Jesus is not speaking to hostile or unfamiliar people, but to “his own” for whom he is about to lay down his life. That means Jesus is speaking to *us* in what Biblical scholar Raymond Brown has called “a magnificent address to those of all time who would be Jesus’ disciples.”<sup>1</sup>

You see, John’s Jesus in this passage is less interested in separation, especially in separating Christians from God or from each other, or from people we disagree with. In fact, Jesus is not emphasizing *separation* at all. Jesus is the

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, Raymond E., and Francis J. Moloney. *An Introduction to the Gospel of John*. New York: Doubleday, 2003.

true vine, the enduring faith, hope and love of God with whom you and I and all branches are unified. Christ, the true vine, summons us to hold steady with a deep trust that we are loved as a son or a daughter of the Divine, and created as such, not according to conditions of acceptance that are dictated beforehand, but because of the shocking, surprising and outgoing love of God.

We will ask God in our Eucharistic prayer this morning to reveal the church's unity; a solidarity that already exists in God. To be clear, our unity in God is not *conformity*—the kind of unity that relies on agreement with one another; that insists on uniformity of perspectives. Those are human creations. The unity that God has given us relies instead on the love of God in Christ. Solidarity in Christ makes room for multiple perspectives in relationship with each other. The foundational activity of God is relational. Every major world religion and wisdom tradition speaks to some version of that basic experience of the Divine. Christians see evidence of that relational action in the community of the Trinity, and in our creation as relational beings in the image of God.

Jesus did not say, “Abide in me or burn.” Jesus did not say, “Abide in me and that will cause God to abide with you.” “Abide in me,” Jesus said and continues to say to us, “Abide in me *as I abide in you.*” Endure with Christ, that is, as God endures within in each and every one of us, and with ya’ll as a collective. That is still the message. *No one here is unnecessary. No one on this planet is extra.* Regardless of who we are or what happens to us, the Risen Christ endures with us—the Risen Christ remains in a sphere of relationships with us.

The longer we stay in relationship with Christ as a community and as individuals, the more practice we get at returning Christ to the center of our attention and action. The more we get in the habit of turning Christward, the more readily God's yearning for creation becomes our own yearning. That's what it means to bear fruit—we are able to produce because the Risen Christ prunes us and cleanses us through the word that he speaks to our hearts.

Too often, we hear the promise in reverse: “If I am good, study my Bible, think the right thoughts and hold the right opinions, God will give me what I ask for,” as though God were some sort of genie in a lamp. Instead, our careful and deliberate resolve to live in Christ begins to reverberate, to come alive, with the

word of Christ living with and within us. Those who abide in Christ and in whom Christ's words abide are the people whose resolve and prayers are God's doing.

Now, I want to be clear that I am not saying that everything that happens to people is God's will—that "everything happens for a reason." Jesus promises that he will be with us and because he is with us as he is with God, that God will work for the greater good. In today's reading, Jesus is talking to his friends just before going to his death on the cross. God's will was not death for Jesus; God wanted loyalty, obedience from Jesus. But when death resulted, God turned a shameful murder into an astonishing example of God's commitment to wrestle life, love and hope from the very places that seem the most empty of life, love and hope.

There are many who disagree with me. For centuries, theologians have promoted the crucifixion as a payment for debts owed either to Satan or to God, or as some other kind of mechanism by which God finds a way to forgive us despite our inherent worthlessness. But for just as many centuries, the Eastern Orthodox have insisted that Jesus died not to appease an angry or vindictive, and frankly abusive, parent. I add my voice to theirs in claiming that Jesus' obedience unto death *defeated* sin and death, freeing those who endure with Christ from spiritual bondage, transfiguring us, so that we may become more fully human as God the Creator intended, and so that we might come to know God's unending commitment to us. The cross was not an implement that made it possible for God to love us; allowing the crucifixion was God's testimony to just how much God already loves us and promises to be with us through all things. The resurrection is God's promise that no matter how much hardship and tragedy we endure, that our hardships even unto death are *never* the last word.

The Eastern Church and the Western Church have been separated from each other for more than a thousand years, and although the Anglican Communion straddles the two theologically, I am unlikely to change anyone's mind by presenting a rational, reasonable thesis. That's because the intellect is not where people make most their decisions about big issues. We tend make decisions about large issues at a visceral, emotional level. Think about issues like gun control vs gun rights, pro-life vs. pro-choice, school vouchers, affirmative action, Obamacare or marriage equality. Can you recall anyone who felt very

strongly on one side of any of these who changed their mind after reading a *New York Times* article or watching a Fox News editorial?

A recent NPR broadcast of “This American Life” explored the notion that certain kinds of interactions with people that we don’t agree with, understand or trust *can* open us to changing our minds, sometimes dramatically. People in the story learned that they had to stop *telling* people things and instead to open a mutually respectful conversation with no road map. Talking about their own experiences helped, but the most compelling move they could make was to *listen*. When the other person provided something that seemed real and emotional and important to them *that was* the lead they followed. In short, they invited people into a sphere of living relationships and stayed with them, even for just 20 minutes.

There is a difference between being absolutely certain and being confidently curious. The truth that we experience is enhanced, even protected, by truths that others experience. Only God has the entire truth and, as the Jesuits like to say, all truth is God’s truth. To be confidently curious is to stay centered on Christ in a sphere of relationships, listening to each other in mutual respect and humility. Each of us is united to the Risen Christ and to others who are also in intimate relation with God in a world full of extravagant difference, where love is an astonishing possibility.

So love one another. Love one another even when you disagree — perhaps *especially* when you disagree—because love is from God and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.