

Blessedly Connected

A Sermon Preached at Calvary Episcopal Church, Flemington, New Jersey
By Father William Thiele on the Fifth Sunday of Easter, April 28, 2024

Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches."+

We've already had children of God imagery, and then the Good Shepherd and sheep parallel. Now we are getting the vine and branches metaphor. All these promise that we can be connected to God.

Jesus returned to Heaven to become the vine that spiritually feeds us and sustains us to eternal life. But before he returned, he taught us to pray, "Our Father, who art in heaven." We call God "Father."

Jesus placed the Father in the "vine and branches" narrative as the vinedresser, without violating the coequality of the Holy Trinity. He said, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser." So, we have a vinedresser, a vine that feeds us through the Spirit and we're the branches.

Vine and branches go along with with the shepherd and sheep imagery of John 10:11 where Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." He did lay it down. Then He rose again. This substantiates the eternal nature of Jesus also as the vine.

But the passage begs a question, "What about the bad shepherd?" The bad shepherd, whom he called a "hireling," doesn't care about the sheep. When they're attacked he does nothing, and they die. The bad shepherd has a bad future. So do his sheep.

The contrast between the Good Shepherd

Year B, RCL, Easter 5

The Holy Gospel John 15:1-8

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples."

Epistle 1 John 4:7-21

Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God; for God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his own Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. So we know and believe the love God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. In this is love perfected with us, that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not perfected in love. We love, because he first loved us. If any one says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also.

First Lesson Acts 8:26-40

An angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is a desert road. And he rose and went. And behold, an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a minister of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of all her treasure, had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go up and join this chariot." So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And he said, "How can I, unless some one guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Now the passage of the scripture which he was reading was this: "As a sheep led to the slaughter or a lamb before its shearer is dumb, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken up from the earth." And the eunuch said to Philip, "About whom, pray, does the prophet say this, about himself or about some one else?" Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this scripture he told him the good news of Jesus. And as they went along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?" And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught up Philip; and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip was found at Azotus, and passing on he preached the gospel to all the towns till he came to Caesarea.

and a bad shepherd raises the parallel question of the true vine versus bad vines. What happens if we graft ourselves onto a bad vine? The answer is about the same as our choosing a bad shepherd.

Because the Lord loves us extravagantly, He doesn't easily abandon us when we waiver, or allow ourselves to become badly grafted in somewhere. God remembers his Son's atonement for our sins.

And what about those poorly performing branches on the true vine? Jesus said this about that, "Every branch that does not bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit."

Nobody likes getting "pruned," but Jesus does it for blessings and success to follow. It is for our joy and that of Heaven.

But suppose we found ourselves grafted onto the wrong vine? That vine could be our social system. If we didn't function as it wished, then it might prune us, or cut us off. Many have been cancelled. Pruning on the secular vine would generally not be for high purposes, but for compliance.

The difference is obvious. Being on Jesus' vine leads to blessings and life forever. Being branches on the secular vine leads to compliance, distress and death. We need to get grafted onto the Lord's vine. That's called conversion, or even what some call "getting saved."

Worldly forces discourage true religion because our allegiance is to Heaven rather than to them. They find Christianity repugnant because it says they're wrong.

The world would control our lives and choices. Individualism is discouraged. But

the world needs to remember how miserably it has always failed when it has tried to extinguish the Church. Just wait 'till Jesus comes again.

Some time ago Church membership ceased to carry a social advantage. In China it kills one's "social credit score." Churches hiding in Chinese houses become raided and some leaders who won't recant their faith are held in solitary confinement for ten months or so, unless they elect suicide instead.

Paul named our conflict with the world in Philippians 3:20. He said, "...our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we also await a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." Our having allegiance to God more than to the state comes at a price.

Jesus told us that our power is in him, the True Vine. He said, "Apart from me you can do nothing." Government and others say, "Apart from us you can do nothing."

Even cold war communist countries failed to exterminate the Church. So will China. The True Vine cannot be fully uprooted or killed. And the Second Coming is, well,it's coming.

We're rooted in Heaven and sustained on earth because we're branches of Jesus' vine. We have confidence in the Jesus who rose at Easter and in those who saw him. Prophecies continue to be fulfilled. History abounds with tales of God's faithfulness.

Life as branches of Jesus' vine is good, but we need to hang on really tight. The Gospel at Calvary Church is a very serious thing. Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches." AMEN +