

A Sermon by the Very Rev. Dr. Renée Tembeckjian  
Trinity Episcopal Church  
2 May 2021  
Easter 5B: Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22:25-31; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

“Through the Grapevine”

My grandfather’s backyard in New Jersey was a dream destination to city kids like us. He grew roses and fruit trees, and, most wonderfully, he established grape vines. They were supported by a labyrinth of tall metal pipes, like an old-style jungle gym, with fruit cascading close to the main vine. He said that’s why the grapes were so good.

Expert vintners agree. The best grapes are closest to the central vine. That’s where the nutrients are most densely concentrated, which makes for healthy plants. And that central vine also *stores* that nutrition for tough times – for cold weather or other harsh conditions – when tender, growing plants need those reserves for life support.

And that is how today’s Gospel describes Jesus, who says that he is the “true vine” – that his way is truth and life, that his way is the nourishment that makes for health and wholeness (which is the definition “salvation”) *and* a source of support when times or conditions or circumstances get rough.

And what *is* his way?

We know the answer, of course, and we hear it again in the letter of John, where, with stunning brevity, he makes it clear for all time what God is and what God is not:

*God is love...and those who abide in love abide in God..  
Those who say, I love God, but hate their brothers and sisters, are liars.†*

God not *about* love, God is not *like* love – God *is* love. Love is the life-giving power within the central vine.

And the branches? That is us, of course -- *we* are the branches. And, as my grandfather discovered about his little New Jersey vineyard, staying close to the heart of the vine gives the branches the best chance to yield good fruit, to grow and blossom abundantly. And if we stay close to the vine, true to Way of Love, then that possibility, the potential to become good fruit, also resides within us. As the saying goes, *It’s in there*.

...but we are also human, and vine branches are often twisty, complicated things.

We say God is Love, but we struggle to love our neighbor or when we feel vulnerable or afraid, we might say God is Power. When we are hurt or angry, we might say God is Judge. When we are in need, emotionally or financially, we might say God is Prosperity. And when we fear the stranger, we might even dare to say that God is Us....

...and so, being the imperfect human branches that we are, we require the occasional pruning back – we will at times need correcting, reorienting, re-turning to the Way of God. That often comes via tough lessons learned during our own hard times or rough conditions, and it may well be painful. But, in the life of the vineyard, whatever hinders the health of the plant, whatever threatens or robs its wholeness, must be cut back for its own dear sake. Pruning is a gardener’s version of tough love.

I will admit that I don’t love the sound of that. It is painful to discover in ourselves, or to have revealed *to us*, ways in which our attitudes, words, choices, or behaviors have knotted up and twisted our branches, choking off our finest spiritual fruit from blossoming freely and fully. And it is sobering to consider how comfortable we have become in settling for so much less than what our vinegrower God planted within us. How quick we have become to rationalize our own views and decisions, rather than confess we need pruning. Maybe it’s only *other* people who need that.

Now, I do not presume to know what might need pruning in *you* – I have enough to manage what needs pruning in *me*. I know what it is to feel less than generous at times, or to be discouraged, to ponder my response when I am unfairly judged, or when I judge myself more harshly than grace would suggest is necessary. I have enough to manage what needs pruning in *me*. Only *you* know what needs pruning in you.

But I *do* know this, in keeping with today’s readings: If we say we love God, and we love our brother and sister neighbors, then we are *not* liars, but beautiful, strong, life-bearing branches in the vineyard of God’s creation. And our branches will bear fruit – the fruit of the spirit – which scripture says is joy, peace, tolerance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and love. <sup>ii</sup>

I want so much to be that kind of branch – I want to stay close to the true vine, to trust that when heartache or challenges come, I will be so nourished and sustained by the central vine of God’s love, that my branch will, in turn, reach to others, to help nourish and sustain a better world around me. And I don’t want to be a liar – I want to have courage to face into the pruning that I need and dare to let any attitude or behavior that does not honor God’s vineyard. I want to abide like someone who doesn’t just *hope* that God is love, but who *knows* that God is love.

And we *do* know. We see and we hear it in the Way of Love – the way of justice, mercy, and peace – which is the Way of Jesus. In other words, we see it and we hear it....

...through the grape vine.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> 1 John 4:16b, 20

<sup>ii</sup> Galatians 5:22-23