“Branches, meet Vine”

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John 15:1-8

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***John*** ***15:1-8***

***I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. 2He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. 3You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 4Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. 5I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. 6Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.***

I recently shared a funny photo I saw on Facebook, that showed a store shelf full of empty pots for houseplants. These pots must have been designed for people like me because each pot had words on it – words like “plant coffin,” or “please don’t die,” or “my next victim.” The thing is, I like plants, I’m just not very good at keeping them alive. Unlike our admin, Cathleen, who is excellent at keeping plants alive. I have this plant in my office. On my first day here in January of 2020, this plant was sitting on my desk, a gift from the congregation where I was prior to coming to Bethany. It was originally a collection of two or three plants, but now this basket has just one type of plant – but, it is still alive! I love how it just keeps getting longer and longer. This vine will keep getting longer and longer as long as I don’t cut it off from the nutrients it gets from the soil.

Fortunately for us, the vine in today’s scripture passage, is not reliant on me for survival. You and I can never be cut off from the life-giving vine of God.

There are seven different times in the gospel of John when Jesus says “I am.” Brownie points if you can remember them all – I couldn’t! I am….the bread of life, the light of the world, the gate/door, the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life, the way, the truth, and the life, and I am the vine. The fun thing about this last one, I am the vine, you are the branches, is it’s the only “I am” that comes with a “you are.”

Warning us against going down a horticultural rabbit hole, commentator Karoline Lewis reminds us that “I am the vine, you are the branches,” and “apart from me you can do nothing” is a statement of truth, not a statement of judgment.1 In horticulture, when a branch is cut off from the vine, it dies. Period.

Jesus didn’t say “you *will be* the branches,” or “*if* you do this or this you *can be* the branches,” or “*sometimes* you are the branches.” Jesus made a statement of fact. You *are* the branches. This is who you *are* – *already*. We don’t need to worry about being pruned away -- the word for “pruning” used here is the same word used for “cleansing” that Jesus used when he washed the feet of his disciples earlier. When Jesus says “You have already been cleansed by the words I have spoken to you.” He means that we are already the branches. God will continue to prune the parts of us that need improvement, the parts of the community that no longer serve God’s plan, as part of the continual work of being God’s people in the world in increasingly effective new ways.

As we and the disciples journey from Easter to Pentecost we have been astounded that Jesus rose from the dead, reminded that the events that happened were fulfilments of Jesus words, and that the future promises of Jesus will be fulfilled abundantly. “I am the vine, you are the branches” is an extraordinary statement of promise and identity. Jesus promises to abide with – to remain with, to make a life with – us as we promise to abide in him. There is great comfort in the truth of the promise that we are connected to God and each other always.

Why might that be a comfort?

It’s comforting to know *anything* for certain.

It’s especially comforting that *that thing we know* for certain is that God cannot let us go.

It is comforting to have *a way to discern* one’s actions – am I connected to the vine with this decision, this action, this belief, this thought?

It’s especially comforting to know that we are not out there alone trying to decide what it means to be fruitful – I read a great quote by a commentator who said, “the vine doesn’t put ‘make grapes’ on it’s to do list.” The vine knows what to do. The vine just does it.

Discussion

Knowing we are connected to God all the time is one thing – but *feeling* that connection often comes and goes. Sometimes we just don’t think about it. In our culture, often God is a subject that only comes up when there is a crisis, or when something specifically calls for God’s presence, like worship, or a memorial, or a hospital stay, or a wedding.

There doesn’t have to be an occasion for God.

Sometimes we are completely consumed by serious distractions or illnesses or worries or suffering, so much so that we are blinded. “Sorry, I don’t have time for God, I have to tend to this emergency.”

What are some things we can do to help ourselves during those times when God just seems like a strategic playing card?

Prayer and study and worship, and finding fellowship that brings us joy, to cultivate friendships that can provide support by listening, by serving others, remembering and sharing conversations with others.

Close discussion…Let us pray….

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-of-easter-2/commentary-on-john-151-8-6> Karoline Lewis