

“LOVE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY”

John 15:1-17

May 2, 2021

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I begin this morning with an aside, something I think is worth saying, but not the main message of this sermon. I begin here because our ninth annual art festival opened yesterday. For those of you who many not be familiar with our festival, it is a juried exhibit of art and poetry built around an environmental theme. This year’s theme emphasizes weather and climate change. At the same time our Sunday morning adult education class is studying the book *The Future We Choose*, authored by the “architects” of the Paris Climate Accord.

Because we are focused on the environment, I thought I should mention that Jesus pays attention to nature and dresses his teaching up in agricultural imagery to make his point. He understood that the same things that help nature to thrive are the same things that help human communities to thrive. When Genesis affirms our role as stewards of the earth, it does so with the awareness that we are part of nature, our very name, human, taken from the soil, “humus.”

For quite some time, humans have stopped nurturing the earth, and instead been trying to master the earth. Instead of understanding ourselves as a part of nature, we have seen ourselves as above nature. We have taken pure water from our rivers and returned it laced with poisons. Our factories have taken in oxygen from the air and returned it polluted. We have data going back 69 years demonstrating that communities where pollution ran high had large incidents of cancer and other health related illnesses. Where violence was done to the earth, human communities suffered. Pay attention to nature. Our survival depends on it.

Jesus is saying something very similar in today’s reading. As he prepares his disciples for his departure, he compares the healthy faith community to a well-tended vineyard. If we pay attention what’s healthy for the vineyard, Jesus’ point becomes clear. If the owner of the vineyard allows the branches to grow without ever pruning them the plant will quickly grow many and lengthy branches. Within a matter of a few years of this inattention, the fruit will become smaller, less numerous, and sour. But if the branches are cut back close to the vine every year, the branches will leaf out thickly, the fruit larger, more numerous and sweet.

There are of course other factors affecting the harvest, but Jesus lifts up the salient point. “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit.” Stay close to me, he seems to be saying. “Stay with me,” is one translation of the Greek word here.

One doesn’t have to be an avid student of church history to know that the church frequently ignored this advice. The Crusades can hardly have been what Jesus meant by “love your enemies.” The Inquisition seems contrary to “Judge not lest you be judged.” Burning heretics seems an unlikely expression of “Love one another.” And so the branches, the faith community needs a severe pruning. A great pile of branches is fit for nothing but burning.

Emily Askew writes in her commentary on this passage: “John speaks very clearly... about what it takes to be part of the community of Jesus: expect to be pruned” (p. 170). It’s possible that the early church associated this pruning with persecution, that enduring the persecution would make the church stronger and healthier. This is not so much about the church’s failure as it is about its suffering. Askew warns us against associating suffering with God’s intent. We do harm when we suggest to someone who has tragically suffered a loss that it must be God’s will. The suffering of the early church arose not from God’s actions but from the church’s actions in following Jesus whose values contradicted the world’s values. She concludes: “Suffering happens. God abides” (p.172). God stays with us through our failures, pruning away the branches that have strayed from the center which is Christ. And God stays with us when faithfulness leads to the ridicule and scorn of a broken world.

So if the vineyard analogy is telling us to stay close to Jesus and to expect pruning, where do we find the strength and courage to do that? How do we, the faith community live our lives close to the vine? The second half of the reading gives us the short answer: love and “friendship.” Here Askew offers some challenging interpretation. She writes, “Love in this passage is not a psychological state, nor is it anywhere described as an internal quality. Love is an action – a really difficult action.... a radical willingness to die” (p. 176).

Thomas Currie led a Reformed Heritage Tour in 2012. They visited a small Reformed Church just south of Lyon in France. As with many reformed churches, its design was “severely” simple. Its sole ornamentation was a stone inscription above the entrance that translates as “Love one another.” This little church rescued some 3000 Jews from the Nazis at considerable risk to themselves.

Reflecting on this church, he writes, “... what is striking is not the remarkable shelter the congregation provided to those in great need or even the courageous love exhibited in those dark days, but rather the freedom and confidence that enabled that congregation to be the church of Jesus Christ” (p. 6). Paul writes in Galatians, “For freedom Christ has set you free.” Maybe it seems strange to be talking about love and suddenly to shift over to freedom. But something in Currie’s observation strikes me as quite profound. Have we bound ourselves in such a way that loving as Christ loved has become impossible? Has the church allowed itself to be bound by sentiment? Do our beliefs, views, preferences, or attachments compromise our ability to love one another without reservation?

“What we lack today,” Currie writes, “is that freedom that is confident in the victory of Jesus Christ over sin and death, a freedom that neither howls with the wolves of popular culture nor is captive to its various political agendas. Such freedom *creates* a culture of forgiveness, *practices* disciplines of love, *ventures* concrete acts of hope. Such a freedom will dare to be the church...will not allow the guilt and shame for the church’s own daily (and historical) failures to drive it either to despair or into some utopian “spirituality” untethered to the miseries and the joys of this fleshly life” (pp. 6-7).

I am weary of the countless theories about what's wrong with the church, but there is something in what Currie says. There are times when we simply refuse to be free. Perhaps we are afraid of the things that will need to be pruned, afraid that we will lose something essential to our identity. But freedom is not the same as independence. The branch separated from the vine is independent, but not free. Jesus is the vine. We are the branches. That is the nature of Christian community. Our freedom is dependent on "staying with Jesus."

I'm not talking about a back to Jesus movement here. I'm talking about seeing Jesus in the twenty-first century, the Jesus who is alive, the Jesus who abides with us even in today's confusing world. But the world will only see Jesus if we bear fruit. When the vineyard is healthy, all you see are the branches. The vine remains hidden beneath the weight of the fruit bearing branches.

I don't know whether it's freedom nourishing love or love feeding freedom, but there's a beautiful vineyard growing up in this century too. There's a pastor out there bringing good news to prostitutes, a friend of Jesus sitting down to eat with sinners. There's a missionary reducing the stigma of AIDS in Malawi. There are protesters, lawyers, and politicians working to bring fairness in policing across the cities of this country. There are healthcare workers tending to the sick, delivering vaccines, and trying to make this a safer world to live in. The blind see. The deaf hear. The lame walk. And good news is spoken to the poor. In this century too. Jesus' people are loving one another. They do it without perks, without acclamation or reward. They do it because they know that they are not alone, that they belong to God, that they are all part of one another.

So, pay attention to the earth, knowing that our destinies are intertwined, knowing that there is much to love in this planet where we live out our lives. And pay attention to others. See in each person the living Christ, who binds us one to another. Stay with Jesus. Love one another. Amen.

Resources:

Article by Emily Askew in *Feasting on the Gospels: John, Vol. 2*

Thomas W. Currie. "The Spirituality of the Church" in *Journal for Preachers, Vol XLIV Number 4: Pentecost 2021*