

Easter 5
Acts 8:26-40 1 John 4:7-21 John 15:1-8

Episcopal Church of St. Mary the Virgin, San Francisco
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“I am the vine, you are the branches.” (Jn.15:5). Amen.

Grapevines in biblical times and geography were known for their lush foliage, intertwining branches, and fragrant blossoms. The fruit of the vines held the place of honor since wine was an important commodity in the ancient economy. In the Hebrew scriptures, Israel was understood as the vine that had been planted and tended by God.¹

The vineyard imagery would have been very familiar to the Jewish Christian community of this morning’s gospel. They were familiar with the prophets calling Israel to turn away from self-centered and destructive ways, and to bear good fruit through faithfulness to God. This community would have remembered the fiery destruction of the Jewish temple in the year 70 AD. Jesus, as the true vine, here, doesn’t imply that Israel as the vine was false. Truth means more than an either/or true/false dichotomy. Here, Jesus as the true vine means that he is sure, reliable, and authentically of God. Through the way of Christ all can have unity with God.

Today’s Gospel and its warnings of fire brought to mind images of the Northern California wildfires raging through residential communities and wine country last fall. Many of us have friends, family, and colleagues who were directly affected; a few of us were personally affected as well. At the time, those who know viticulture assured us that the vines would likely survive even if the branches and the buildings were lost. “It’s pretty hard to kill a vine,” one expert noted. “Even if you kill the top part, there’s a good chance the root system is still alive.”²

The scars from the wildfires will last a long time, especially in the lives of those who suffered major loss. A teacher who had lost everything, in a different fire, spoke of the pain of especially losing family photos and mementos of her parents and grandparents. Now she had nothing to pass on to her daughter. But she also spoke with resilience, and a willingness to pick up her life and begin again, as so many have had to do. The outpouring of kindness from others, she said, had helped her take the first steps forward.

¹ Phyllis A. Bird, “Vine,” pp. 1112-1113, in *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, Paul J. Achtemeier, ed. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985, p.1112.

² Bill Swindell, “Wildfire effect on Sonoma, Napa vineyards? Grape growers wait to see,” *The Press Democrat*. February 8, 2018. <http://Pressdemocrat.com> Reprinted in the *North Bay Business Journal*. <http://www.northbaybusinessjournal.com/northbay/sonomacounty/7970166-181/sonoma-napa-vineyard-wildfire-damage>

We cannot control the wildfires that will scorch our lives, those devastating events, illnesses, or losses that change life as we have known it. But we, as branches, can draw upon the vine that nourishes us, where we will gain the strength to endure and to heal, until such time as we are able to bear fruit again.

Some years ago, a young woman walked into church one Sunday morning after a co-worker had suggested that a faith community might help her cope with the death of her husband from a massive heart attack. Both, in their thirties, had been just about to start their family. In a few moments, her everyday world and her future had been shattered. For the first few weeks, church was a place where she shed many tears. People sat with her in quiet, compassionate support during and after the services. As she later explained, her tears were also about the relief of being able to be loved and accepted just as she was, in the midst of her pain. She also began to feel the love of Christ stirring within her, which helped her bear the pain and begin to rebuild her life. As the tears came less often, she felt that she wanted to give to others the love and acceptance she had felt. She became active in the parish's healing ministry and started exploring Stephen ministry. It was a long journey, but she began to feel new fruits of peacefulness and hope emerge.

The vine enables the branches to flourish in good times, and to hold on during the storms. As we are healed, and made whole in Christ's love, we are better able to let go of what has traumatized us or hardened our hearts. This is the role of the beloved community (all of us together), and it requires our active participation as we share the love that we have experienced in our lives with one another.

The essence of Christian love is that it is directed specifically toward those who may feel unloved, or unlovable, and even toward those who show indifference or hostility toward us; for this is the type of love that God has shown to us.³ In this morning's reading from Acts, Philip encounters, engages, and explains to a eunuch how Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures, and then baptizes him into the Christian family. The eunuch, holding a position of responsibility in Ethiopian society, would have been looked down upon in Jewish society of that day.⁴ The importance of Philip's action is to emphasize God's love and inclusion for all persons. Philip's love through acceptance, transformed the eunuch. All we, too, need is perhaps one such encounter with unconditional love and acceptance.

Loving doesn't mean excusing unethical, hateful or abusive behavior. However, it does call us to recognize that God has endowed all with a fundamental human dignity, which we as Christians must respect and uphold even as we struggle against injustice and oppression. If we fall short of this, we risk becoming no better than those who oppress.

³ Paul W. Hoon, "Exposition," "The First, Second, and Third Epistles of John," in *The Interpreter's Bible*, George Arthur Buttrick, ed. Vol 12, pp. 207-313. New York: Abingdon Press, 1957, p.281. Cf. Matt. 5:44-48.

⁴Despite Isaiah's exhortation that a faithful eunuch would be welcomed by God, in practice they typically were excluded. Chris Haslam, Comments, Revised Common Lectionary Commentary Clippings: Fifth Sunday of Easter - May 3, 2015, <http://montreal.anglican.org/comments/archive/beas5l.shtml>

In the Letter of John this morning, we hear the clearest embodiment of the nature of God from a Christian perspective. The community for whom this letter was written had suffered a severe internal conflict. For a community that understood itself as unified in Christ, social discord also became into a theological issue, challenging the community's very self-identity as the beloved community. As one Johannine scholar notes, the solution to the issue of discord and the way to heal wounds for John is found through embracing God as love.⁵ In a radical reversal of both Gnosticism and Hellenism, two major influences of that era, John emphasizes that love defines God's nature; love first comes from God⁶ and is the source of our ability to love.⁷ Divine love at creation is the primal love that forms the basis of human love.⁸ It is a passionate parental love, a love that accepts us as we are, a love that is faithful when we have acted in unlovable ways, a love that wants only the best for others and all those whom they love. As the body of Christ, the community of faith becomes the tangible expression of this divine love. This is what it means to be fruitful.⁹

If the love of Christ is to spread, it must be through you and me. God's love is the root, Jesus the vine that humanity has seen and interacted with, and we (as the branches) bear the fruit of God's love as we encounter others. Belief and love are the heart of the gospel for John and are the basis of the Christian life and community.¹⁰

Our youth, on their mission trip this summer, will venture into the fire-ravaged areas of the North Bay. There may be some "doing for others" in the projects they undertake. But the greatest gifts they can bring are their love and compassion, and their desire to be present with the youth and others whom they encounter, showing that they really care. Listening and caring are acts of love. Sharing God's love becomes a way of *being*, as they (and we) build relationships, have fun together as well as seek to understand what others have experienced. It takes time to rebuild. But our love, our presence in showing up, and the relationships we form, can change and deepen hearts, theirs and especially ours.

God will survive without us if we turn our backs. So will Jesus Christ. But will we? How do we cope with loneliness, feelings of futility, or hopelessness, in a way that gives us courage and meaning and purpose? This is what our Christian community, rooted in God's love, can and should be providing one another, here and to all whom we encounter in the world. To abide in Christ means that Christ will abide in us, and in our hearts.¹¹

⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*. Third Edition. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010, pp.496-503.

⁶ Amos N. Wilder, "Introduction and Exegesis," "The First, Second, and Third Epistles of John," in *The Interpreter's Bible*, George Arthur Buttrick, ed. Vol 12, pp. 207-313. New York: Abingdon Press, 1957, pp.279-80.

⁷ C. Clifton Black, "The First, Second, and Third Letters of John." Pp. 363-469. In *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. Xii, Leander E. Keck, et al., eds. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998, p.429.

⁸ Hoon, p.288.

⁹ Cf. Robert Kysar, *John. Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986, p. 238.

¹⁰ Hoon, p.287.

¹¹ Cf. Norman Perrin and Dennis C. Duling, *The New Testament: An Introduction*. Second Edition. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1982, p.363.