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“I Am the True Vine”

John 15: 1-11

As anyone who knows me know can attest, I have no green thumb. And I suspect that our appreciation for Jesus' words here is limited by the fact that we are not an agrarian society. Jesus lived in an age whose most important science was horticulture. When we in the modern era are hungry we head to the grocery or a fast food joint or a restaurant; virtually none of us grow our own food. But in Jesus' day, the health of society depended upon growing healthier, hardier, more bountiful plants. We cannot appreciate that Jesus spoke to a people who understood something about the importance of grafting, a skill that I daresay is lost on most of us – yet a skill whose fundamental value must be comprehended to grasp the meaning of Jesus' metaphor. Ancient cultures learned that they could improve a plant or tree by taking a similar species with some special positive trait and splicing a branch or a stem of that plant into a parent plant. The goal was to join tissue to tissue – a very intimate image – so that if that graft “took,” and the tissues of the plant truly fused with the tissues of another, the result created was a new hybrid breed stronger and more productive than the original. As Jesus looked around the table and knew that he was about to speak to them of wine as a symbol of his shed blood, he uses a companion image that all of them could grasp: “I am the vine and you are the branches.” He was saying, ‘You must be spliced into my life, into the life of God!’ By that powerful, intimate, agrarian image, our Lord defined for us what it means to be truly human.

Last night we looked at the promise of our Lord: “I will not leave you desolate. I will send to you a Comforter, a Counselor.” This assurance resonates throughout the Gospel of John; it is an image that conveys the singular promise, ‘I will be your constant companion. No individual need fear being alone.’ By contrast, the image of the vine is a *communal* image: we are defined in communion with God and with each other, as we are spliced into the living vine, grafted into the tissues of God's life so that our tissues grow stronger, healthier, more productive, filled with the energy of God's purpose. What an extraordinary image - - what a moving, intimate metaphor! To have life we are grafted – grafted! – into the life of God.

Again, because we are not farmers, and because our lives do not depend upon our agricultural skills, the profound meaning of that metaphor does not move us like it did Jesus' original hearers. So let me suggest a complementary image that might help drive his meaning home. Think of the vine of Christ as an oxygen hose, and think of yourself as a diver in a diving suit, connected to that oxygen hose, which provides you with the very breath of life. If you sunder your relationship to that oxygen hose for any length of time, you will die. You are tethered to that hose of life. All who are connected to it can operate and function because the breath of life flows through the tether into their lives. That's the image our Lord is trying to convey. The vine is the hose of life. We are grafted into it, and through it we receive the very oxygen by which we live.

Many years ago, when I lived in Louisville as a seminary student, I came to learn of a rather famous oncologist in the area. I never met him; I simply knew him by reputation, I learned of him through the testimony of others. But he was integrally connected to the seminary community, well-thought of, greatly respected as a brilliant man. But over time, this man must have lost one patient too many. That's what his friends who knew him well told me later – he lost one patient too many. He eventually felt cut off from his sense of purpose, became frustrated with his skills, became so overwhelmed by his failures, that one day he took his life. The reverberations of his act resonated throughout our seminary community, indeed, throughout the entire city. Some years later, I met another oncologist, similar in reputation to this former

acquaintance, similar in skill, who, too, had become frustrated by the cumulative weight of his losses. Too many deaths had dried up his passion for healing; he felt as if he had lost his purpose. In response, he volunteered to become a permanent medical missionary in Africa. He left his lucrative practice, left all the comforts of his successful career, left his friends and professional associates. From every corner he heard the same word: "What you are doing is crazy!" But what he was doing was grafting himself anew into the life of God. He was allowing God to graft him again into a fresh purpose of the divine, thereby allowing the Spirit of God to use him anew.

There is a word that enjoys great currency in our culture, used often in relation to people's practice of the Christian faith and used often in relation to people's practice of ministry or some other high-stress profession: the word is "burnout." But as I reflect upon this metaphor of our Lord as true vine, as I reflect upon the similar yet divergent careers of these oncologists, it occurs to me that what we call "burnout" is really spiritual asphyxiation. Spiritual asphyxiation. Over time, someone in a sacrificial vocation or stressful calling cuts themselves off from the air hose of Christ who provides the very breath of life. They allow themselves to become ungrafted from the living vine. Their life dries up. Maybe what we call "burnout" is a loss of the inflowing of the Spirit of God. It can happen to anyone, in many contexts.

Our Lord says, "I abide in you and you must abide in me." Our Lord is explaining to us that our true humanity is to be found by being grafted into the ongoing life of God. To be cut off from God's vine is to be cut off from the energy of life. It is the way of death. "I abide in you, and you must abide in me," our Lord reminds us. Or as Paul, quoting a pagan poet said, "In God we live and move and have our being." Christ is the true vine, and we are the branches. The way of life is to be spliced into the very tissues of the living God. This is a thought we can take with us into the night that commemorates the evening our Lord was betrayed.

Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer
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