

Grace and peace to you.

We continue this week with another “I am” gospel passage describing who Jesus is: the Good Shepherd last week, and now the Vine (the true vine). We’ve skipped forward in the gospel account from last week, from the 10th to the 15th chapter (next week we’ll pick up right where we leave off today), and actually find ourselves in the middle of the Last Supper. Especially here in John’s gospel, Jesus seems to be trying to get in as much teaching as possible this night before he dies, stretching this teaching from chapter 13-17. Today, we read about neither foot washing nor the Lord’s Supper, instead, we have this image of a grapevine and its branches.

Grapes are one of those plants that can be cut back pruned down to the rootstalk, and come back even healthier than before. Gardeners and green thumbs use grafting techniques to take a cut-off branch and bond it to good rootstock; the strong, healthy root system providing ample nourishment to strengthen or boost a fruiting branch’s ability to produce. Grapevines, apple trees, and even roses can be grafted.

Between Jesus’ talk of the true vine and talk of pruning, we have these competing visuals of being grafted on or cut off. Our first reading, from Luke’s account of the Acts of the Apostles in the earliest days of Jesus’ followers after his ascension to heaven, documents the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the emerging Jesus movement’s beginnings. Since Easter, we’ve heard pieces of this story: from the community giving everything they have to hold in common, to the apostles (the sent-ones) healing in Jesus’ name. Today, we hear about Philip being sent out by God’s angel, and stumbling into a court-official from Ethiopia who came to Jerusalem to worship, but who was undoubtedly barred from the inner Temple because as a eunuch, he was a sexual minority. Ancient Israel’s laws forbade castration of men, as a means to uphold the sanctity of God’s creation and to uphold God’s first commandment: to be fruitful and multiply, but the effect of the law, meant to preserve, was to cut off those from other cultural backgrounds who wanted to know and worship God.

This Ethiopian eunuch is unnamed in the text – my mentor and internship supervisor chooses to call him by the Amharic name, Dawit (Beloved), because like all of us, he is beloved by God, no matter what. Dawit is trying to learn about this God of Israel by himself when Philip runs into him and gets one of those nudges. I’ve heard people call it a God wink or nudge or breeze: “Go check in with that person.” And Philip does it, and Dawit soaks up everything he teaches, including the good news about Jesus. And when they passed by water Dawit asks, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” What is there to keep him cut off from community? What is there to prevent him from being grafted onto Jesus? Nothing.

Followers of Jesus are called across cultural and traditional barriers. We are called to include anyone and everyone who God calls into community, who God grafts into the vine. As I was pondering this vine analogy, it occurred to me that human instinct pushes us to divide ourselves along cultural or linguistic lines: we cut off and ostracize people.

While God trims away at us as well, Jesus makes that clear that both fruiting and non-fruiting branches are pruned for the health and production of the whole. God cuts away unhealthy stuff, not entire people. We could ask: What does God cut off? Instead of: Who?

Jesus also seems to be really hitting home the point that we are not made to be alone – the group who talked our way through this text on Thursday couldn't help but notice his words: “apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). As Leta so deftly pointed out: “Apparently, you're not supposed to be off on your own.” While solitude can be holy (Jesus himself frequently went off by himself to pray), a balance between solitude and connection is essential as humans. To pretend that we are entirely self-sufficient just doesn't ring true; we need our neighbors and our neighbors need us. And, we need God.

Remember that this is the Gospel of John, famous for John 3:16 (and 17): “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be **saved** through him.” Jesus' purpose is the salvation of the world, branches connected to the vine are saved by that connection, but what does that mean?

Have you ever wondered what it means to be saved? Some folks might have an immediate answer, and it's okay if you don't! Salvation is not something white, North American Lutherans spend a lot of time talking about, and I really wish we'd talk more about it, because I grew up in a context where I cringed at the phrase “Jesus saves” because it was used as a cudgel. It really meant that anyone who didn't believe the same things about Jesus were NOT saved. It was code for that ostracizing thing I talked about earlier: cutting some people out of the community of insiders.

But this is my favorite Koine Greek word, the root is *sōzō*. It does mean to save, and even to rescue. It also means to heal and make well. God sent Jesus to heal the world, the whole world. Salvation is not limited to a few select individuals who say the right prayer. Salvation includes the healing of individuals and communities. *Like branches being grafted onto the true vine.* And what a beautiful image to describe eternal life: being restored in our relationship with God and all that God loves!

All of us need pruning. And our forgiving and merciful God still claims the role of judge – without taking forgiveness off the table, we would be remiss to ignore the reality of the consequences of our actions and inactions. Consequences to our neighbor and ourselves, and therefore to our relationship with God. All of us need pruning. So, I love the image that Bonita brought to the table: the stuff that God prunes from us, call it our sins or faults or prejudices or mistakes, it's kinda like mulch. The dead leaves and grass clippings and wood chips that can compost down dying away to offer nutrients to help the trimmed plant thrive. Just like the opportunities we are offered to learn and grow from our past – to produce good fruit as part of a restored body, together with other members of the Body of Christ (or, for today, the Vine of Christ).

Even judgment then, God's cosmic pruning, is a gift that goes hand-in-hand with forgiveness. Parts of the gift of salvation: God's unending work to heal, rescue, and restore all of creation into loving, fruitful, nurturing, and ever-growing relationship with ourselves, our neighbors, and our God. Thanks be to God, amen.