

The Bethel Pulpit

Pastor Margo R. Martens

April 29, 2018. Fifth Sunday of Easter



BETHEL

LUTHERAN CHURCH

On the web at www.bethel-madison.org

312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703

Text: John 15: 1-8

Title: I am the Vine. You are the branches

I am...yes...I am...I am a sister, I am a daughter, I am a cousin, I am a mom and a grandma, I am a neighbor, I am a gardener, I am a member at Bethel, I am an American. WHO ARE YOU? Pause for a moment and tell the person next to you who you are...

In the Gospel of John, Jesus often uses that "I am" phrase:

I am the resurrection and the life

I am the bread of life

I am the gate for the sheep and I am the Good Shepherd

I am the light of the world

I am he (in response to the woman at the well who was waiting for the Messiah)

Today we hear Jesus say: I am the true vine...I am the vine and you are the branches.

What do you hear in those words of Jesus? Vine and branches? Really? What are you saying, Jesus? Picture a grape vine...or a raspberry bush...or any tree in your back yard.

Why does Jesus use this image to describe himself and us?

When I hear Jesus say this to me, the most basic thing I hear is that Jesus is saying that his connection to the disciples...to me...to all of you is one of ultimate relationship: the leaves on the branches, the branches on the vine...inseparable, absolutely inseparable from one another.

Now I'm asking you to go back to your own personal "I am.." statements. As you think about who you define yourself to be, are any of those statements void of connection? As I thought about my own statements, I noticed that every self-description I offered to you

denotes connectedness. Yet, the one connection I failed to name was: I am a branch on the divine tree of life! I am a branch on the Jesus' tree! I am a branch, because Jesus SAYS I am!

Why is Jesus, at this point in John's Gospel, highlighting his connectedness to his disciples? We are in the 15th chapter of John, and Jesus has begun to prepare his disciples for the time when he will no longer be with them...prepare them for his absence, in the events of his crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, coming up in the very next chapters of John.

I am the vine and you are the branches. A statement of reality. This is the essence of who Jesus is and who we are: inseparably connected, for all time. This is a profound statement...a profound self-description by Jesus. I am...we are...CONNECTED!

The story we have from Acts today is another story of connection: the eunuch, riding in his chariot, reading the book of Isaiah. And Philip, prompted by the Spirit, runs over to the chariot and begins a conversation with the eunuch. The pairing of these two texts is significant. The eunuch admits that, on his own, he is unable to understand what he is reading. So Philip rides with him, telling him the story of Jesus' death and resurrection...and this crazy, unnamed eunuch then notices some water and asks Philip to be baptized. The pairing of these two texts, for me, illustrates the twin truths that Jesus is vine to me and to you, individually: TRUTH #1. We are connected to Jesus.

And the Acts' story helps me toward TRUTH #2: that Jesus' connection to each of us individually then connects you and me...and all of creation...to one another. This is the story and promise of the CHURCH. On our own, without Jesus AND without one another, we cannot be fruitful branches.

I am the church...you are the church...we are the church together. All who follow Jesus, all around the world: yes, we're the church together.

As a congregation, we not only need one another within Bethel: our congregation needs all other congregations to fully understand the scriptures. We, as congregation, need the synod here in Wisconsin, and we need the larger ELCA...and we need the other denominations so that we can listen and tell and share and work together, to be the CHURCH AROUND THE WORLD, bearing the fruit of Christ.

I am the vine and you are the branches. That's enough for us to take with us as we leave worship today. Jaroslav Vajda has written an amazing commentary on this text, which, for me, describes beautifully this divine connectedness:

**Amid the world's bleak wilderness, a vineyard grows
with promise green.**

The planting of the Lord himself.

**His love selected this terrain, His vine with love he
planted here**

To bear the choicest fruit for him.

**We are his branches, chosen, dear, and though we feel
the dresser's knife.**

We are the objects of his care.

**From him we draw the juice of life, For him supply his
winery**

With fruit from which true joys derive.

Vine, keep what I was meant to be:

Your branch, with your rich life in me.

A good prayer to carry with us, each morning when we wake:

**Vine, keep what I was meant to be: Your
branch, with your rich life in me.**