

Branching Out
John 15:1-8
2 May 2021
sermon preached by Rev Jessica McCrae

Our gospel writers loved a good agricultural metaphor and today our lessons continue with another rich metaphor, an image that we can relate to, in order to better understand what Jesus, what God, is like. Last week we looked at the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd and today we hear that he is like a vine and God is the vine grower. This is one of my favorite metaphors because I spent much of my childhood in wine country, in the Niagara Peninsula in Southern Ontario. I always lived in town, but on the countryside surrounding us were miles and miles of soft fruit orchards and acres and acres of vineyards. The soil and the climate in Niagara is perfect for them.

For a large portion of the year the vineyards were not very attractive to look at, not on the surface anyway. Throughout the harsh Niagara winters the vines clung desperately to the wire trellises, spindly little cold branches interwoven with each other as they branched off from the main vine and traveled the trellis to entangle with their neighbour. When you looked at them you could hardly tell where one ended and the next began, and when you looked at them, with the harsh wind and blowing snow whipping

across the escarpment you couldn't imagine how they would ever survive the winter to see spring, and yet every year most of them did; they would survive, clinging together, anchoring each other against the raw damp cold and ice off the lake.

Winter was not a particularly attractive time in the vineyards unless you could see the potential, unless you had experienced the yearly cycle before and recognized the life that these frozen branches contained, unless you were able to find beauty in their strength, their interdependence and their strange courage to survive in these harsh conditions. It was not a beautiful time unless you had seen the way the sunlight danced off the ice encrusted vines after a freezing rain storm, unless you held the strong smell of the grapes piled a metre high at the autumn farmers market in the middle of downtown Welland. Winter was not a beautiful time in the vineyard unless you could remember, or imagine, the promise that those frozen vines held and could see the transformation they would make and all that they would produce.

It kind of reminds me of the church during covid. With so much loss we may be feeling a little bare, and lifeless right now. But we are clinging together and every time we gather like this together, though

apart, we are seeking out strength in the gospel, seeking out the nourishment we need to help us to bear new fruit and new life.

So the metaphor of the vines seems like a great one for us today, to reflect more deeply on both our relationship with God and also the ways we seek out God's strength and God's hope, and how it then impacts our community. Let's listen again, "I am the vine, (and my Father is the vine grower). You are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing."

In this image we are given the assurance of care – Jesus is the vine providing us with nourishment and life, God in the Holy Spirit tends to us and sustains us through all of the harsh winters, blowing winds and pandemics of our lives, and God our creator roots us, anchors us and holds us strong. But it doesn't end there. We are not rooted and nourished and sustained so that we can just "be", so that we can flourish on the vine and look pretty. We are nourished and anchored and sustained so that we may bear fruit, so that we can be given the environment we need, and the courage we need to create something of value and use to the world, the community, our families. So that even when times are difficult and uncertain, we may share the

Good News of God's love and hope that we know in Jesus Christ with others, so that even when we might be apart, others come to know we are never alone. It is all about the bigger picture. We are given the promise of love and courage so that we can do those things, produce those things, that not only point to the love that we have received in Jesus Christ, but that also help to sustain and nourish others so that they may be able to produce their own fruits that will enrich our world, enrich their communities and their families.

You see, part of living into fullness, of growing into the very best and the most whole expressions of ourselves that we can muster, part of growing into discipleship – or full Christian, spiritual beings – means that when we begin to recognize these gifts, when we begin to develop talents that stem from these gifts, we figure out what to do with them, we “pay it forward”, so to speak so that we can be co-creators in our world and bring about new life and new opportunities. A life of faith, a life of rich “faith in action” means that we grow to a point where we can not help but respond, taking what we have learned, taking what we have produced, and share it with the world. And the good news is that we do it all the while knowing that we are being upheld and sustained with the grace, strength and love of God.

We can't help but respond.

Let me give you another metaphor to explain this, this one "non-scriptural". I once read about an experiment done at Amherst College in New York State. Members of a science and horticultural department planted a squash seed as part of an experiment. When the plant had grown and produced a squash about the size of a human head, the students placed a band around the squash. The band was attached to an instrument that measured the amount of pressure exerted by the squash as it tried to grow against the constraints of the band. It was expected that the squash would exert about 500 lbs of pressure. Which it did. However, the squash had not stopped growing and within 2 months 500 lbs of pressure had increased to 1500 lbs of pressure. The students reinforced the bands when the pressure exerted by the squash reached 2000 lbs. And at 5000 lbs, well, the squash broke the band and was allowed to grow as nature intended. Amazed at the strength of the squash the students began investigating at which point they found that the squash had sent out over 80,000 feet of roots searching for the strength to grow against the force that was holding it back. The squash had single handedly taken over the entire garden space.

This is an amazing story, and totally true by the way, that illustrates for us how strong we can be when we seek out the nourishment and faith we need - **when we seek out the love of Christ, we gain strength.** No matter what holds us back, whether it be obstacles that seem out of our control – like this pandemic - or obstacles that are very personal, we can **gain strength** to help us move beyond them when we seek out the love of Christ and the support God gives us in community.

It makes sense doesn't it? When we look at what we know about strong communities, when we consider the metaphor of the grape vine and the interconnectedness the grape vine has with the vines and the ground around it. As we consider ourselves and our communities we realize that alone we are only so strong, but when we can rely on God, and when we can rely on the support of others, we are our strongest and healthiest.

And I know it can feel like an extra challenge to do that when we are unable to gather in person. I know many are feeling alone and isolated right now and community feels far away. But this community endures, our faith endures. So this week I challenge you to reach out to at least one person you haven't talked to in awhile,

from this church or from your own wider community. Make that connection. Remind them, and yourself, that this community is still a source of strength and love, even if presently things look and feel, different.

The story of the vine is a comforting image of God's love and care for us, and it is one which gives us strength and courage. But this is also a story about interconnectedness – a story of the importance of interconnectedness both with God and with the community, people and resources that surround us. It is a story of new life, of what can happen, what transformations and growth that can occur when we align ourselves with a life force so powerful that it can not be stopped. It is about searching for and receiving the strength to continue amidst seemingly insurmountable obstacles and about letting God infuse us with the nourishment we need to grow into full expression of our hearts, spirits and minds. And it is a powerful metaphor for the church today, grappling with such change during this pandemic, worried about what we will look like when this pandemic lifts, wondering how we can be as strong as we once were. It is a metaphor that reminds us that if we are rooted in Christ, nothing can separate us from the strength and love of God.

It is a reminder that Easter is not over, but Easter – transformation and new life – is alive and possible, residing in God's people, all of us with our different gifts, different views and different talents, waiting for opportunities to lay down roots, to reach out and to spring to life. Today we celebrate the glory of God's mysterious and powerful love and the life force that sustains and connects us all, and connects us with all of creation. Thanks be to God.