

The Fifth Sunday of Easter
John 15:1-8
May 10, 2009

How appropriate our reading is today concerning vines and branches as our thoughts turn to spring, green, growing things sprouting up and out to our delight. I, for one, have squeezed in a few minutes here and there to survey the flower beds, pulling up those hardy weeds that are the first plants to make an appearance in my garden. Every day I notice just a little bit more of the perennials that survived the cold beginning to poke through. I have a clematis plant growing along side the fence in our backyard. The first new shoots have begun to poke their heads up and as the days grow warmer and sunnier, the vine continues to grow, straight up until it can find something to entwine around. I will help it along by pointing it near the fence until one day the shoots grab hold. By the end of summer, a full bough of vine and blooms will have grown. Serenity asks me everyday, can we plant flowers now? We're counting the days until we can.

It is also appropriate for me, on Mother's Day, to reflect on the fruit that women's bodies bear, precious children, and how we step back and watch that fruit grow, take off, begin new shoots of their own. Growth. Movement. Bearing fruit. But also letting go, allowing the branch to seek its own way, seeking its own direction with all the joys and disappointments as well.

At first glance this reading seems so straight forward, so logical to hear. Of course, Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. Of course we are to go and bear good fruit and if we do not, we will be pruned away. We also are to prune away anything which is 'dead' in us or causes us to not grow, to flourish. We are to prune away any thing which does not enhance the kingdom of God. Where the struggle can begin is what do we prune and is what you prune the same as what I would prune?

As many of you know, Tom and I were recently in Salt Lake City and we spent a day visiting the Church of the Latter Day Saints. I do not mean to pick on just them, but I will say I am still processing that day. Certainly good things have come from that faith tradition; they do outreach to those in need. But, how is the vine doing? I have to question any faith tradition that claims to have all the answers. For me, faith is a living, growing thing. Faith is to be explored, questioned, researched, studied, and nourished. It is to be poked and prodded, pulled up and out, tucked into soil and fertilized. Perhaps this is why Jesus chooses the image of a vine and branches to help illustrate to us what we should be about.

Of course, all this poking and prodding in the Church can be uncomfortable. Certainly in the Episcopal Church we have felt such poking such as in the 1960's, when Episcopal clergy choose to march in the civil rights movements, the 'new' 1979 prayer book, or at least the newest version of the prayer book, the ordination of women, the consecration of women bishops and the consecration of Gene Robinson, our ponderings over gay rights and the inclusion of LGBT persons in our congregations, the beginnings of gender neutral wording in our prayers. At St. Paul's we are exploring and discerning what our urban ministry is and what that will look like, the work of the task force, the U2churists and jazz, blues, and using music other than that found in the 1982 hymnal, wearing name tags, moving coffee hour, just to name a few. Perhaps you

like some of these new shoots off the vine, perhaps you don't. But we have to try. We have to let it grow, see where it will go. And if it is not producing good fruit, than prune it off. But the point is, we at least are open enough to give 'it' a chance. That is what I love about our church, the Episcopal Church. We go the via media, the middle way, not because we can't or won't make ultimatums, but because we understand that God and our faith in God is a living vine, a living thing which should and needs to grow and stretch and move. Growing can be painful. Did you ever get growing pains as a child? Those leg aches because your muscles and bones were forming to become the adult you are today? Growth involves pain and risk and sometimes disappointments. But how will we know if the shoot will grow if we don't give it time, nourishment, half a chance to succeed? Perhaps it will bear good fruit, perhaps it will need to be pruned. I am thankful that I am part of a church which allows such freedom. With all this growing going on, it is easy to assume we are in charge, we are the vinedressers. We are not. Jesus is the true vine, we are the branches. All that we do or attempt to do needs to be grounded in God because as the scripture says, we can do nothing without God. We are called to live together as an Easter people in our Christian family. God will tend the vine so we may produce the fruits to spread the kingdom to all people, not just those who produce but to those who are unable to; the depressed and sick, the poor and underemployed, the dirty and unhealthy. To produce fruits of love and justice to bear and give to one another, to all people and to welcome all into our community. Jesus says I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. As I watch my clematis grow, I am reminded that we too are stretching towards the fence, allowing God to be our guide. Alleluia! Amen.

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