

St. Giles' Episcopal Church
May 16, 2010 – Easter 7
John 17:20-26 and John 15:1-11
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

As you may have noticed, during Easter season many of our gospel lessons are from the gospel of John. Chapters 13 through 17 of John are referred to as Jesus' "farewell discourses." These chapters include several long speeches of Jesus to his disciples, given between the time he knows he is about to be betrayed by Judas until he goes with his disciples to the garden where Judas, soldiers, and police sent from the chief priests and the Pharisees meet him and he is arrested. This morning's lesson is the end portion of these farewell discourses, and it is Jesus' prayer to the Father.

The language in this lesson is rather difficult and abstract. The point is that Jesus prays that all who follow him will be one, with one another and with him and with God the Father, just as he and the Father are one. This unity is founded on love, the love with which the Father loves Jesus and the love the Father and Jesus have for Jesus' followers.

To explore the meaning of this passage, I would like to go back to the 15th chapter in the gospel of John, to the Parable of the True Vine. The theme of this parable is similar to the theme of this morning's passage, but the concrete images may be more helpful to our understanding. Listen to this parable:

Jesus said "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ... Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. 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. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a

branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned. ... My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete" (John 15:1-2, 4-6, 8-11).

As in all his parables, Jesus is talking about one thing but really telling us about something else. This is a parable about relationships – the relationship between God the Father and Jesus, our relationships with God and with Jesus, our relationships with one another. God is the creator and source of life and of all good things. God and Jesus are united in love. We are meant to be united to God and to Jesus in love. And we are meant to keep Jesus' commandment: "Love one another as I have loved you."

Jesus tells us that he is connected to us just as he is connected to the Father. And he is inviting us to be connected to him: "Abide in me as I abide in you." We have a choice about this, don't we? We can choose to acknowledge God as the source of our lives and stay connected to God, or we can choose to separate ourselves from God and try to live our lives on our own. Jesus tells us what the consequences of the choices are. "Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit ... Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned."

Passages like this can be difficult because they seem to be saying that if we don't do what is right, God will punish us. I have a hard time with that idea. It doesn't seem to fit with the love and forgiveness God offers us through Christ. I have come to see these

passages not as a threat of God's punishment, but rather as simply a statement of fact, of what happens. Something like a physical health issue. If you don't exercise, eat right, sleep enough, etc., you will not feel as healthy and energetic as you could. You might not actually get heart disease or cancer or diabetes, but you won't feel "fit." This isn't a punishment. It's just a fact about human bodies.

I think this is what Jesus is saying. A fact about human beings – creatures of God made in God's image – is that if we stay connected to God, the source of our lives, we will bear much fruit, and if we don't, we will wither and become worthless debris. If we assent to love, we will grow in love. If we don't, we won't. We have a choice. And the good news is that one choice we can make is to hold onto the Vine, Jesus. We can turn our lives toward God and stay connected to the Vine that will give its branches abundant life.

Now there's a caution in the parable, though. "Every branch that bears fruit God prunes to make it bear more fruit." Even if you are attached to the vine and bearing fruit, God will prune you so that you bear more fruit. And pruning can hurt! If you read the lives of the saints, of people of deep faith and love of Christ, you often find that they describe a process of pruning or stripping in their lives. God prunes our souls of what is superficial so that we can grow deeper roots in God. God prunes our souls of the clutter that keeps the good fresh air of the Holy Spirit from reaching our centers. God calls us to grow, and there are growing pains in addition to pruning pains.

I've said this before – the Christian life isn't an easy life. It is a life of being pruned and stretched and challenged. It is a life of being called to re-orient ourselves toward God over and over again. It is a life that includes the cross. But it is also a life

that is connected to God, the only true source of life, a life shared with the Savior who came so that we might have abundant life. It is a life that promises to bear much fruit – the fruit of the Holy Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, as St. Paul tells us in his letter to the Galatians (5:22-23).

In recent weeks we have seen the blossoming of spring – the glory and the mystery of nature breaking into leaf and flower, into color and fragrance. Jesus promises that if we abide in his love, we will blossom and bear fruit. Because if we turn our lives to the source of life and unite our lives to the life of the true Vine, God will work in us and through us. And the world will be better for the gifts you and I are, for the gifts we bring to the world from God. To bear the fruit of God's love is true joy, the joy Christ our risen Lord promises us if we abide in him and his love. Amen.