

John 15:1-8

Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. God desires us to bear fruit, and to do so we must remain in Christ.

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 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. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

John's Gospel moves into an agrarian mode by focusing on vines and the vine grower. The image has an Old Testament history with the vine used as a metaphor for the people of Israel, in both positive and negative ways. Jesus' role as the vine is twice identified, in v.1 as "the true vine" and in v.5 as "the vine." This is the life source of the branches. It is God who tends to the flourishing of the branches, and likewise will "remove[s] every branch" (John 15:2) that gives no yield. With almost mantra-like force the word "abide" is repeated 8 times. What is the meaning of abiding in Jesus, the Risen One during this post-Resurrection season? First, the relationship of abiding means that we cannot "go it alone" in our spiritual lives, what Parker Palmer once described as a "free floating spirituality." Jesus notes the impossible cannot happen: "the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless you abide in me" (John 15:4). It is no secret that one can be deeply engaged in "things of the Church" in publicly meaningful ways, and yet the activities may not be truly connected to Christ. In that case, the vine grower eventually gets around to pruning such branches. Second, abiding in Christ the Vine means change! John 15:5 notes that abiding means the opportunity to "bear much fruit." What does that mean? This passage does not define 'bearing fruit!' As with any lively metaphor, it invites imaginative ways of engaging with it. Might bearing fruit mean renewal of hope for a dying congregation? A new unity of purpose in a congregation ripped by conflict? A congregation beginning to see and respond to the poor, the hungry and the imprisoned in their community in a way they had not before? *(Susan Hedahl, Working Preacher)*

COCU35B.Easter5B.Readings

Essentially, the key of this week's theme is that our love for God must flow out into love for others – both Christian companions and others – in such a way that they too come to love God and others. This growing cycle of love for God and neighbour is what it means to bear fruit for God's Reign. The section from Psalm 22 speaks of proclaiming God's righteousness (justice) to unborn generations. This is an exhortation to share the goodness and justice of God with others in such a way that it impacts the world for those who are yet to be born. Philip's obedience to the Spirit, and gentle witness to the Ethiopian eunuch is an example of this fruit bearing – sharing God's grace and love with others (who would usually not be welcomed – as a Gentile and a eunuch this man would not have been permitted into the temple) in such a way that it changes the world for time to come. Some scholars have speculated that this eunuch could have founded the Ethiopian church that continues to this day. That's quite some fruit! On a global scale, this week's idea of a justice or righteousness that is proclaimed to unborn generations is compelling. So often even our quest to love as Christ did is so immediate and short-sighted that we fail to recognise the long term impact of what we are allowing in our world, and sometimes, our work for justice now results in long term consequences that undermine or even negate the good we have created in the short term. For example, a few years ago, using biofuels to address short term energy needs and climate change issues, resulted in great social challenges for third world countries as grain prices went up and food became increasingly scarce as crops were diverted to the more profitable biofuel industry. As we seek to respond to the call of this week's Lectionary to bear fruit, we need to acknowledge that true love does not seek the "quick fix" but is willing to commit to the long term, seeking true justice and attempting to bear fruit that lasts. This is a massive challenge in a world in which corporations are measured quarterly and Presidents have to prove themselves in 100 days. The addiction to immediate solutions and benefits is bringing suffering in so many ways – from human trafficking of children as cheap labour in the chocolate industry, to sweat shops in the clothing and technology industries, to the impact of fossil fuels on the environment, to the corruption that prevents aid reaching those who need it in some countries. But, the mark of our love as Christ-followers today will be seen in generations to come by whether our world is more just, equitable and sustainable because of our efforts to love well.

Acts 8:26-40

Philip is instructed to go to a certain road where he encounters an Ethiopian eunuch on his way home after worshipping in Jerusalem. Philip finds him reading Isaiah's scroll, and explains what the Scriptures say about Jesus.

Then he baptises the eunuch

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

Psalms 22:25-31

A psalm of praise and commitment in which God is celebrated for God's provision and authority, and all people are challenged to worship God, to fulfil promises to God, and to proclaim God's righteousness to unborn generations.

From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.

The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the LORD. May your hearts live forever!

All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD;
and all the families of the nations shall worship before him.

For dominion belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations.

To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him.

Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord,
and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.

1 John 4:7-21

An exhortation to love one another, because God is love. If we cannot love those whom we have seen, we cannot love God whom we do not see. Since God has loved us, so we should love one another. Such love drives out fear. Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.