

The True Vine

Preached on The Eighth Sunday after Trinity
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
August 7, 2022
Texts: Rom. 8: 12-17; Matt. 7: 15-21

We spoke last Sunday about God redeeming us from our wandering in desolate places. We also revisited the metaphor of our Lord in which he speaks of our being grafted onto the True Vine. As we have seen so often, Jesus uses agricultural realities to teach us. The natural world is replete with examples for our edification. Vines somehow know how to cling to what is firm and unmovable and grow toward the light. Wild animals know how to survive without taking any courses on the subject. Even mammals, where learning plays a larger role, pick up survival skills quickly. Birds know to fly north in summer and south in winter. God has planted into each natural thing such good instincts as enable it to avoid “all hurtful things,” seeking only “those things which are profitable” for it.

But what about humankind? We seem to be an outlier. How does the never-failing good providence and care of God so arrange things for us that we shun the hurtful and seek what is good for us? For our well-being does not seem to be a matter of irresistible instinct. Healthy growth and development can be thwarted in many ways through environment and temperament. Indeed, only humans seem to be at odds about how best to achieve health and flourishing. If there was unanimity, politics would be almost non-existent. Instead, it seems that only humans question the moral and political norms proposed by other humans.

Christians claim to have norms rooted in ultimate reality. These are, of course, found in Christ. But we encounter them inadequately through our unregenerate intellects. We need a more intimate union with Christ to truly incorporate them. In John’s gospel we read:

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit....I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15. 1-2, 5)

In last week’s collect, we asked God to “graft us” by love into Jesus, the true vine, to make us grow up filled with his life, “increasing us in true religion.” We asked him to nourish us with the strength and goodness which rises through Jesus into us, and to keep us in that same vine safe from storms and disease until we yield the fruit of everlasting life.

Because we so need this divine aid, our flourishing is not automatic. Left to our own devices, we cannot achieve our true end. Rather, we must undergo a transformation

that does not lie within our own power. We need a new life; and this only can begin, according to our Lord's image, with a grafting. The Father must cut us out of the tree or vine which produced us and graft us into a new one. The tree of unregenerate human nature is too diseased to grow consistently toward the light and its roots cannot get the nourishment they need. If a branch on the human tree is to produce full, sweet fruit, it must be cut out of the tree of the old Adam and grafted into the new human nature of Christ, pure and strong. Of course, grafting requires cutting not only the branch, but also the new host tree. Jesus is cut open for us on the cross; we are grafted into his wounded side from which flowed water and blood. The water is the baptism of a new life; the blood is the nourishing strength of this Holy Sacrament of the altar, the communion of the cup of everlasting salvation.

To reiterate, humans cannot live solely by instinct. We are not locked by genetics into a social role that harmonizes with our compatriots. This is only established through laws and sanctions that grew up through centuries of debate, testing, and strife. Almost everything in the human world is contestable and open to question and debate. Things only seem "natural" because we stop questioning them. It is important that things seem justified the way they are, because we need stability. At the same time, many of our rules continually require maintenance and review. Human society is complex, and it does change over time, requiring that many of our former understandings need to be re-evaluated. As much as it pains many of us, we are, as Aristotle pointed out 2400 hundred years ago, political animals. We also possess moral norms, many of which do not rest on universal assent. This pluralism appears to be intractable, and is the reason that authoritarianism has a perennial appeal

Christians cannot hide from this reality, though they can pretend it doesn't exist. The question for those willing to face facts is how to live in a fractured world where many no longer believe in good faith rational debate and deliberation. Some Christians might propose a political and social philosophy. Such offerings should be studied and debated respectfully. But maybe we should start more modestly with the attitudes Christians should possess before presuming to instruct anyone. In today's Epistle, Paul tells us that we "have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but...have received the spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father." Christians should not to be ruled by fear, as unfortunately so many have allowed themselves to be. Fear is what the world uses to keep people in line. Think about how much of peoples' lives are steered by fear, a fear often of losing temporal things. So much of politics is about this. You can galvanize very powerful movements based on the fear that people will lose something if they don't vote for your party. This is how demagogues can convince people that only they can protect them. "Beware of false prophets," says Jesus, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves who will eat you alive.

A powerful way Christians can witness to the Faith is to show unbelievers that we will not succumb to fear, nor seek to monetize it. Unfortunately, many influential Christian leaders have done just that. They have grown powerful by stoking fear in their followers, showing themselves to be just like their secular counterparts. If Christians really believe that we are children of God and “joint heirs with Christ,” a new perspective should become evident in us, one in which priorities are re-ordered and things are viewed relative to the Kingdom of God. Fear will no longer be our default position.

The Apostle also points out that Christians will accept suffering as a necessary consequence of following Christ. This is not a very popular view in today’s world. We want a Christianity that involves no suffering, because such is viewed as unqualified evil. Observe the continual claims of Christians today that they are being persecuted when they meet resistance from popular culture. Ironically, they are often taken to task because they have flouted Christian values, not because they love Jesus. Still, truly following Christ will involve suffering, no matter how Christian a culture may be. To identify with Christ makes us odd as far as society is concerned. It will therefore often see us as a threat to the status quo, which we are. If we are truly linked with Christ we will continually die to sin, which in itself brings pain. But the Christian view on suffering is different than the world’s. For suffering is never meaningless for the Christian. As Paul says earlier in Romans,

[W]e rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.
(Rom. 5: 3-5)

Reorienting our life takes work. The will must be trained. We still have the long, hard, practical work to do. We must turn from the ways of the flesh to those of the spirit. Our bodies and our minds must be changed in all their habits and associations. We must mortify what is evil and turn and cling to what is good. We cannot discover the good by merely trying hard to think clearly about it. We can only discover it by following Christ’s example. Jesus says that people who *do* the will of the Father will enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 7: 21) A few verse later he says that “[e]veryone who hears these words of mine and *does* them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. (Matt. 7: 24) He doesn’t say that everyone who thinks positive thoughts about what I say is home free. If you truly believe something, it will come out in your actions. Good trees produce good fruit. Don’t listen to what people claim concerning their Christian faith; watch what they *do*. By their fruit you shall know them. Are they dying to the world, the flesh, and the devil, or seeking their good within it? Are they suffering with Christ, or just trumpeting how put-upon they are? Are they stepping out with confidence and security in their heavenly Father’s love, or are they just peddling fear?

Sanctity is hard to attain, which explains why so few even seek it. To discern the difference between the apparent and the real good, to cut ourselves away from the hurtful and grow bit by bit toward the healthy, to live by its strength and nourishment until the

great harvest, all this requires grace. Unaided human nature cannot achieve this, no matter how much we have been formed and shaped by a Christian society.

The society of our post-war generation was influenced by the moral and ethical remains of two thousand years of Christian civilization. We have spent a great deal of that capital. The only realistic hope of invigorating this civilization lies in the Church doing what a society without God cannot. She must again join herself to the True Vine from which she has cut herself off. No amount of strategizing or “re-branding” will achieve this. No charismatic leader will save the Church if the Spirit is not active within it. Our only hope is to be so firmly grafted into Christ through the Spirit that we cannot help but manifest him to the world.

In the Name...