

**The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza**  
**The Church of the Good Shepherd**  
**The Fifth Sunday of Easter – May 2, 2021**  
**John 15:1-8**

*Jesus said to his disciples, "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." In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Lord knows, I am a lousy gardener. But even I know that proper pruning results in well developed plant life. In my early adulthood, I thought I "should" take up gardening. Well, that didn't last long and I have since realized I have no lasting talent or inclination for it. I do, however, have an abiding appreciation for those who garden well and their lovingly-tended landscapes.

I have also learned that the fruit of one's efforts often take on the flavor of the gardener's personality. For example, I love the look of the lush and wild abundance of English gardens with their overflowing flower beds and romantic, sweeping landscape designs. As much as I tried to recreate this look of barely contained nature, it just wasn't my inherent personality style. Whenever I planted flower beds, they tended to look much more like the rigidly structured French garden style, with its formal and symmetrical lines – only less artfully conceived. I wanted to the look of seemingly natural chaos and mounding abundance, and what I ended up with were perfectly separated and rigidly symmetrical flower beds. Sigh... Sadly, the fruit of the gardening resembled the personality of the gardener.

Students of viticulture know that it is not only the grape variety that determines the flavor of the wine. In addition to the wine-making process, the qualities of the soil, the amounts of water, the elevation, and the climate all affect the flavor. The very same grape vine grown in different places, with different weather conditions, and different soil may produce discernably different flavor. Yet again, context matters.

**I am the vine, you are the branches.** This is the seemingly eternal push and pull tension of nature versus nurture; communion versus autonomy; unity versus individuality. How are we distinct and yet inter-related? Where do others end and I begin? Are we indeed "all in this together" or is it "every man for himself"? Push and pull, push and pull.

Part of our problem is that we live in a philosophical context of dualism. Something is either this or that. You are right or wrong; something is good or bad. Are we individuals or inter-dependent? Are we material or spiritual? Body or mind? Our American culture enhances this western context of dualism even further by centering ethical considerations upon the individual and by elevating the notion of self-determination and self-reliance as the greatest good. The fruit resulting from this particular ground leads us to privilege "pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps" mentality and individual rights over more communitarian thinking. Born and raised in this context, we inherit a mythos that encourages us to think of ourselves as wholly self-determined creatures primarily responsible for our individual selves only.

But the "truth" is more complicated. God's reality is much more wholistic and inter-related. It's not so much this or that, but this **and** that. While saying that these days may sound trite, that makes it no less true. Lying just outside our everyday concept of reality is a greater truth, that encompasses a more expansive whole.

**I am the vine, you are the branches.** For a number of years, Jonathan, Emma, and I were members of a contemplative Christian community in Austin, Texas, called The Church of Conscious Harmony. Now, that is an unfortunate name that evokes all sort of crystal-waving New Age imagery, but we found them to be a deeply spiritual Christian fellowship and it was a wonderful spiritual

home for us for a number of years. The senior pastor there, Tim Cook, had a favorite simple illustration to explain how we live individual expressions of life that are deeply connected and inter-related, not only with each other but also with God. He called this “Dog Ball Theology.” Not Dodgeball Theology, but Dog Ball Theology.

Tim said that creation was like a rubber dog ball with its primary mass centralized and the spines sprouting out. We live our lives as these individual spines, always connected to the ball, and through that always connected with each other. But we focus our attention outward – striving and reaching forward – and we eventually forget that we are connected to the ball. All we see from our vantage points are the other spines – all of our focus is on them and ourselves. As we reach further out, our connection to the ball diminishes in our perspective. And it is dangerous to stretch too far, we thin ourselves and introduce weaknesses. We are more prone to breaking off – fruit grown that far away, is fragile.

Our strength is found in turning our attention as much inward as outward. We need to remember ourselves as part of the dog ball. We need to feel ourselves grounded there. Spending time remembering our roots in what St. Paul calls the “ground of our being” calls us back to our true selves and strengthen us.

Are we individuals? Yes. Are we also members of one Body? Yes. We are each unique a unique expression emanating from the one reality of creation. Different and yet the same. Separately expressed and yet interdependent. Diverse and yet commonly sourced. One and yet many.

**I am the vine, you are the branches.** I have read that in a vineyard, the best grapes are produced closest to the central vine. Perhaps this is true because that is where the nutrients are most concentrated. Perhaps it is because the branch is strongest closer to the vine and can better support the weight of the fruit. I’m not sure, but I do know that this is why the lateral branches of grape vines are not allowed to ramble all over the arbor. They are pruned and kept short, so they are strong and vital, and bear abundant fruit. Careful pruning is essential for abundant production of grapes. Jesus uses this this metaphor to describe the life of discipleship. Jesus is the true vine, God is the grower, and we are the branches. Through this image, two aspects of God’s created world are held together: bearing fruit and being pruned.

This language of pruning makes us nervous – it sounds like judgment, like punishment. The vine grower removes branches that bear no fruit, and such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. Even harder to hear is that the branches that do produce fruit do not escape the knife. They are also cut in order to produce more fruit. So, if all the branches are pruned – those that fail to produce fruit and even those that do – then perhaps the focus of this process of pruning is more nuanced than mere judgment and rejection but rather about strengthening and sustaining abundant life.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus has gathered his disciples around him and seeks to prepare them for what is coming. He foresees the hardships and death he is about to face. He knows the trials his disciples will face in the days ahead and he meets with them one last time and seeks to console them. Wishing to strengthen and protect them, he invites them into a more profound relationship by urging them to abide in him. Reassurance comes from remaining close to Jesus, weathering whatever storms may come.

Jesus says to them, “Abide in me as I abide in you.” The late theologian Eugene Peterson translated these words as, “Live in me. Make your home in in me just as I do in you.” *Make your home in me.* Root yourself in me. Build your life securely connected to this bedrock. And from this home in me, engage the world in my name. The notion of making the heart’s true home in Jesus, brings peace to the turmoil that characterized the disciples’ lives – as it comforts and brings peace to the turmoil of our lives today.

Tethered securely in place and making our home in Jesus – abiding in him as branches to his vine – we are given sufficient nutrition and strength to branch outward. We will, however, need to

be pruned from time to time. Trimming back our wild and tenuous runner branches that consume energy and yet are too weak to produce abundant fruit. We are strongest at our connection to the vine. Hard times will come – as they do – but living, abiding, finding our home in Jesus the vine, with God the grower, sustains and strengthens us. As Jesus counsels and prays with his disciples in the last hours of his time with them, he invites them to stay close to him by placing their trust in him. He warns them that they cannot go it alone, trusting in their own strength. On their own, they would be cut off from their life source. They would bear no fruit. But if they abide in him – if they source their lives there – they will be nourished by the waters of eternal life.

**I am the vine, you are the branches.** With God as the gardener, we may anticipate the pruning to be costly, but trust that it will be righteous. As master gardener, God will tend and prune the vineyard not to impose punishment but rather as an act of love. And we can be assured that the fruit that we produce when we abide in Jesus the vine will be abundant and life-giving, and will reflect the personality of God who we know to be love.

Amen.