

The Grapevine

Today’s Gospel reading is a great example of how Jesus drew on nature to help his disciples and us understand the Kingdom of God and how we can draw closer to it. Today he describes himself as a vine; presumably a grape vine. And we can imagine ourselves as branches off of that vine or perhaps as individual grapes. And we can imagine our congregation as a cluster of grapes hanging from the vine and maturing in response to the sun, the rain and the soil.

Thinking of ourselves as a cluster of grapes is a great way of reminding us that, even though we are all uniquely different, we are all fed by the same source. We are all ultimately dependent on the same vine and the same soil for our nutrients. And like grapes in a cluster we are interconnected. This is true both physically and spiritually. And for we who are Christians, the name of the vine that sustains us is Jesus Christ.

It is a very collective understanding of who we are. The grapes in a cluster prosper together or wither and die together. And grapes in a particular cluster can be identified as part of that cluster, because the cluster as a whole has a distinctive flavor.

Jesus also draws attention to the vinegrower’s task of pruning the branches of the grapevine in order to generate a better harvest of grapes. And by so doing, he

helps us to consider that the painful separations, the injuries and challenges that cut us off or stunt our growth during the course of our lives, don't have to be seen only as fruitless tragedies.

Instead, in the greater scheme of things, these "prunings" can be seen as events that will make us more resilient and eventually cause us to be even more fruitful. The pruning of the vine is Jesus's poetic way of referring to his crucifixion. But it is also a way of reminding us that adversity is one of the means by which God turns ordinary people into great people.

I think that this is true because, when people suffer for the lack of something or lose something that they delight in, it becomes more precious and is no longer something to be taken for granted. It becomes something worth fighting for. Whereas, when we feel that something is available to us all the time, we tend to take it for granted.

The Bible and the Reformation

There was a time more than five hundred years ago, when people were not able to read the Bible for themselves. Everything was written by hand, so books were a rare and precious thing. Then the printing press was invented and suddenly it was possible to spread information far more widely and quickly. Among other things, people were made aware of the excesses of the church in Rome, which led to the Reformation, that divided the church into Catholics and Protestants.

Generally speaking, the new found possibility of sharing the printed word with ordinary people was not taken for granted. And over the centuries that followed, great efforts were made to educate increasing numbers of ordinary people, so that today, commoners like you and I can read for ourselves.

And one of the features of the Protestant Reformation, was the effort to translate the Bible from Hebrew, Greek and Latin into the languages that most people actually spoke, including English. And this was done so that ordinary people could read the Bible for themselves, and no longer have to rely only on a clergy versed in Latin. Prior to the Reformation and in many places for centuries after, the faith of the people was based on what sounded to them like undecipherable magical incantations. And their ability to understand the reasoning behind their faith was limited to what they could glean from stained glass windows, drawings or whatever stories the priest chose to translate.

But as more people became readers and Bibles became more accessible, there also came a shift away from the understanding that the primary responsibility for the salvation of the people lay with the clergy. The shift was toward the understanding that the primary responsibility now lay with each individual Christian.

You can imagine that this was an exciting, but also frightening development for people who had thought that just showing up and doing what the priest tells you, is all that is necessary. Now you could read the words of Jesus for yourself and

could use the knowledge you gained to think and act on your own behalf. But now you were also directly accountable for your own actions in a way you had never imagined being before.

It's a great privilege and responsibility that we have when we take out the middle person between ourselves and God. Today the Bible sits right in front of us in the pew and most of us have Bibles in our homes. And even though, as a clergy person, I am here to preach and to share my understanding of what scripture is saying to you, you are encouraged to go straight to the source and apply your own reasoning to the same stories. to draw your own conclusions and to live accordingly. But you also own the consequences for the conclusions you draw.

The Bible essentially took a thousand years to compose. And for an additional two thousand years, it has been the “spiritual vine” for Western Civilization. The stories in it, teach us about God our creator, Christ the Son and Holy Spirit – three in one. And the details in it's stories are the nutritious sap in that vine, that provides us with wisdom about how God's love works. Scripture provides us with a precious means by which we too can tap into a several thousand year old ongoing conversation with God to a degree that was never possible for most people through most of the history of our faith.

Cut off

I'd like to return now to the theme of pruning. Sometimes in this world, we are cut off from what is precious in life by terrible events over which we have little control. But sometimes it is we who cut ourselves off. And for various reasons (we can

speculate as to why), we as a society, have cut ourselves off from scriptural vine that has sustained our civilization.

What I mean is that in most households today, the Bible remains an unopened book, sitting on a shelf. It has become more like a symbol for whatever we want it to mean than something we open in order to familiarize ourselves with its actual contents.

And we can guess at some of the reasons why this is the case. For one thing, it is a huge book that says a lot of different things, often speaking in ways that are unfamiliar to us. So it takes time and effort and some education to understand it. You can't just pick it up and read a sentence out of it and assume that the sentence means what you think it means. You also have to look at how that sentence works as part of a larger story, and consider how it would have been understood at the time it was written. And sometimes it says things we don't particularly want to hear. It is much easier to leave it closed and to pretend that it says what we want it to say.

And in this busy world where many tasks and activities call for our attention, giving that kind of time to the Bible seems too extravagant. And so, for most of us who take the Bible seriously, it is enough to get the gist of what we need to know in a ten minute sermon. But even we are a decreasing minority.

I think this is unfortunate, because when we allow ourselves to be severed from the kind of direct relationship with our Savior that became possible with the

invention of the printing press, we are more likely to be misled, and I say this because, many of the things attributed to the Bible today are straight out misleading.

Misrepresentations of the Text

One of the most important things you should know about the Bible is that it is not an American book. It is true that some of our most cherished values as Americans have been drawn from its pages. But all you have to do is open it and read a few pages here and there to realize that the Bible was written by a foreign culture. It was composed in the ancient near east and comes out of a cultural mix that is very different from and sometimes in direct conflict with our own way of life.

In fact, part of its great value for us lies in the way it gives us an outsider's perspective on ourselves. Jesus comes from another world and his views are very different from and sometimes highly critical of many aspects of our way of life.

And so, it is deeply disturbing to me that many are going out of their way to conflate American culture with the culture of the Bible and to present true Christianity as though it is whatever way we as Americans want it to be. It is a way of remaking God in our own image that is incredibly dangerous. It is something the Bible is highly critical of. It is the sin of self-idolatry.

This kind of misrepresentation of the Bible is only possible because the majority of our fellow countrymen, regardless of whether they profess to be Christians or not, don't actually open their own Bibles. The fact is that the time most Christians in

our country today spend in front of an open bible today is a small fraction of the time they spend absorbing Social Media. And what that tells us is that Jesus is no longer actually the vine that is feeding them. The vine that feeds most Americans today is Social Media which represents interests very different from the interests of the God of the Bible.

I think this is very important for us to recognize, because we will soon be celebrating Memorial Day and not long after that the 4th of July, days when we will profess our love for this country both in church and in the community. And it will be very important for us to be clear about the difference between our Christian faith and our love for this country.

Christianity that is rooted in the Bible is a universal faith that favors no-one on the basis of nationality. And so, as people who love this land and love our communities and way of life, and who are dedicated to the well-being of our fellow citizens, we can genuinely understand that our love is also an expression of God's love, while at the same time remembering that this does not make our Christian faith exclusively American in any way. Jesus himself came for everyone. Every nation should aspire to be a beacon on a hill for the well-being of the world, and none should make an idol of itself in doing so.

The Ethiopian Eunuch

Which brings us finally to the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch. Most of us begin our journey of faith like he did. After going to church in Jerusalem, he sat in his

carriage, frustrated by his inability to understand what he was reading.

Fortunately for him, Philip came along and helped him to understand it, by reading it in light of the story of Jesus's life, death and resurrection.

Unlike the Eunuch, most people today, after being puzzled by its complexities, close the book and toss it out the window. And in doing so, risk missing out on what comes next. Because, with the help of Philip, a light bulb goes off in the Eunuch's head and the Holy Spirit guides him into a direct encounter with Jesus and he begins to understand the saving significance of what he is reading. He suddenly becomes like the man who found the treasure in the field and ran off and sold all he had to buy the field. Right away he has himself baptized and from there he goes on his way rejoicing.

Bible Study

I may sound like I am moving toward a shameless plug for engaging in Bible Study and I am. The story of the Ethiopian Eunuch and the reality of our times calls for it. If our congregation is like a cluster of grapes and scripture is the primary cord through which we receive the nutritious sap that we need in order to prosper, then we need to have a direct relationship with it order to recognize and counter the attempts that are being made all around us to misrepresent its contents. It's a journey that we will need to take, if our congregation is to remain a genuine beacon of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

