

The Wealth we Share

(John 15 etc...)

9/15/24

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This morning I want to reflect briefly on the words of Jesus contained in the Order for New Members; where Jesus says, “I am the vine, and you are the branches.” Jesus is comparing our congregation to a cluster of grapes, ready to be harvested and enjoyed. And the vine and network of cords that connect us and through which we are nourished represent the covenantal relationships that we have reinforced this morning.

The vows we make to support each other are a solemn responsibility we take on ourselves. But they are by no means to be understood as a tedious obligation. They are meant to be a support which we extend to each other freely out of the goodness and gladness of the Holy Spirit which God bestows on our hearts.

And when life calls one of us away to some other place, we send that person forth joyfully, knowing that whatever blessing God has bestowed on that person here in Montague, will be a blessing to that place as well.

Let me reflect briefly on those blessings. Consider the range of vocations reflected in our pews. There is training in education, business, food service, music, fire-fighting, medicine, dance, child care,

engineering, and technology... (well we could use one or two more members trained in technology).

And each of you, delivers these and many other gifts through a fascinating range of personal qualities: humor, kindness, generosity, self-discipline, to name a few. This is the unique “cluster” that is our congregation.

In this sometimes overwhelming world, many have succumbed to the temptation to stay in bed on Sundays or to wander over to the computer and get lost in their chosen media bubbles. It’s the easy way. The makers of these bubbles are too often happy to sedate us and draw us in by telling us what we want to hear and playing on our fears in ways that make us strangers to our neighbors.

So it is good that we are here to be connected with each other and with the love of God, face to face; sharing food, sharing stories and sharing our lives, with all the challenges and rewards that go with it. It may take a little more effort, but here in the comfort of this time set apart, we can regularly pop these bubbles and experience each other as we really are.

You may have heard that a number of states have initiated bans on cell-phone use in their public schools, because of the damage that too much time on line is doing to the minds of young people. I think it is also time for us in churches to recognize that protecting ourselves and our children from becoming enslaved by on-line misinformation is also a religious issue. Anything that plays a role in poisoning our minds with hatred and separating us from the vine and from our ability to love others as God loves us, should be of deep concern to us as a congregation.

Through the cords of covenant that bind us together, we have the power to stay connected to each other, and to create our own atmosphere of love and encouragement, face to face, without having online voices standing between us, trying to tell us what we are seeing and who we are talking to.

And we can pass this commitment to living in community, face to face, forward into the future as a gift to those who follow us. Because the vine that joins us together in God's love also extends forward in time, just as it extends back in time to the ancestors who continue to send us love and wisdom for today.

The Spatial Reach of the Vine

The amazing thing about these invisible cords of love is the way they extend, not only through time, but through space. Because we are but one cluster on a vine that extends to the farthest reaches of the earth.

Think of what a huge blessing it is to us that we are connected to all this richness; how our faith draws nutrients from the soil of so many far places.

Sometimes when people drive by small churches like ours, they will imagine that it is a place filled with only one kind of people and that the reason we get along is because we are all predictably the same. But even if we wanted it to be that way, it isn't the case.

The truth is that there is always much greater diversity in our congregations than we imagine. The congregation I served in tiny Heath, Massachusetts, hidden away in the hills, was surprisingly diverse, with a diaconate that consisted of a staunch conservative, a moderate evangelical, a moderate progressive and kind of a shape shifter who was all of the above. All of them were set in their ways, but loved each other very much and were proud of their friendship and their church.

And the reason they got along was not based on sameness. It had to do with their belief in the power of God's love to create a life-giving community for them, in spite of their differences. And just as importantly, they were committed to the same promises we made before each other today; they were willing to make the sacrifices necessary to stay connected to each other on the vine.

As a congregation, we too are not so easily defined. Some of you come from families that have been shaped by hundreds of years of local history going back to the American Revolution. Some have been stationed around the globe through the military. We have a member who's origins are in Guatamala, a Pastor who grew up in South East Asia and in our new members group alone, a young man who grew up in the farming country of Benin in Coastal Africa and two teacher- farmers, who cut their teeth in the Springfield Public Schools and then ran a small farm in Vermont. We are a mix of conservatism and progressivism, of Catholicism and Protestantism, so that the soil from which our congregation draws its life reflects the diversity of our country and beyond.

And all of this makes the time we spend together, face to face, richer, more surprising, more challenging, and ultimately more exciting than

anything that can be gained by sitting alone and watching a screen with a cup of coffee on Sunday morning. I believe that through our commitment to living together in God's covenant, we have been set on the path that leads to the fullness of life and salvation with God.