

Sixth Sunday of Easter, Sunday, May 17, 2020, Year A

**St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: John 15:1-11

***“Connected to the Vine”***

In today's Holy Gospel, Jesus – who had just told His Apostles where He was going, and that He is the Way, and the Truth and the Life, is still with them in the upper room. Jesus wants to make it clear that He is turning over a pretty hefty task to them. He tells them that it is clear that God the Father is the “Gardener” - the One who cultivates the vineyard in order to produce an abundant harvest. Many of us here in Douglas and Coffee County can relate to this because we live in a farming community. How timely it is that today is Rogation Sunday when we pray for a fruitful harvest – it all coincides. Jesus is the vine, the thick life-giving trunk that runs along the fence or trellis. He says that we are the branches - those smaller vines growing out of that main vine. It is a fact that branches get pruned so that the vine will focus its energy on growing good quality grapes instead of a lot of lesser ones.

The Apostles, still in the Upper Room, have in a sense, already been pruned during their time alongside Jesus – and now they are about to undergo some even more serious pruning in the days to come – that they never would have expected in a million years, for Jesus would be taken from them, only to be miraculously reconnected with them – in three days.

In the agricultural world that they lived in, Jewish tradition used the symbol of the vine to represent the family of Israel. I must tell you, that having been to Israel twice, even today, the area around the Sea of Galilee – not much has changed from the time that Jesus was there. Yes, there are some paved road and telephone poles, but the farming is still being done, and there are vineyards, and the wine, and the grapes. It is amazing, so it sort of gives you some insight into what was being done at the time that Jesus lived. When we talk about the family of Israel, we are not talking about the country, but the man, Jacob, the son of Isaac, who had been given a new name by God Himself, Israel, and his descendants who would be known as the twelve tribes of Israel. God brought the vine out of Egypt and transplanted it back into the Promised Land. Jesus is now sharpening this image by saying that He is the True Israel and God's Promises are resting upon Him. Those who follow Him and believe in Him are members of God's true people, His family, with the branches connected to the True Vine. God spoke through the Prophet Isaiah in chapter 5:1-2 when He said: *“I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit.”* This entire chapter from Isaiah tells of God's reaction to Israel's disobedience, a stiff-necked people, causing the people to be exiled in Babylon from the Promised Land.

I think you will agree with me, that God is righteous and He promises redemption if people return to the vine – their ‘first love’ - but desolation would come to those who refuse. Jesus in His imagery of the ‘vine’ and the ‘branches’ makes it far more personal than the image of the nation of Israel, or the people of Israel. His message is for each believer – and that means you and me.

On that Thursday evening, in that Upper Room – Jesus had already told the disciples that they are in Him as He is in the Father, describing the intimate relationship that can be enjoyed with Him – but we need to cultivate that relationship. Sin can block our relationship with Christ. If we are in Christ and not bearing fruit - we have to fix what is blocking the flow. You have planted a crop and it is just not looking so good. As a farmer you are going to have to do something to kick it into shape – maybe it is more water; maybe it is more fertilizer or nutrients. If we are in Christ – we need to examine our relationship with Him. In trusting in the Lord – we give Him permission to fill our lives with His will – and in doing so – He very well might prune us down – so that we might grow more in Him. How does Jesus prune us? He refines us – where we might live, or work, our friends, our language, or He may even humble us.

Pruning is refining us, bringing us closer to Him. Helping us to cut away the things that will hamper us – that don't allow us to grow into who we are supposed to be. The words from the Apostle Peter that we heard this morning calls us to do just that, *“finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble.”* (1 Peter 3:8) God longs to refine us, to work with us in His forge, to mold us, using His Holy Fire to refine us, making us exactly what He wants us to be, and His discipline will strengthen us. I can't help but think of the words from James, the brother of Jesus, in chapter 1:3-4 *“because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”* In other words – being the person that God designed you to be.

There are two things we can do when God prunes us:

- we can either grow from it, flourish and bear much fruit
- or we can moan, and groan, and complain.

God prunes us for us to Grow.

So where are we in relationship to the Vine? Are we connected? If not, we have got to give ourselves over to Christ. Are we growing personally? Are we growing spiritually? If not maybe we need to seek His Will for our lives – instead of ours. Trying to do **our own will in His name** only results in failure – and that is called pride. **Doing His will in His Name** will most certainly result in peace, blessing and success. Let me put it this way: branches that decide to go on their own –will spiritually wither and die. You know what happens to those. But those who stay connected to the 'vine' and get 'pruned' from time to time – will thrive and bear fruit.

Remember - Jesus is the Vine, We are the branches, and apart from Him we can do nothing! For me it seems so simple - we can either get connected to the Vine, or get burned in the fire, the choice belongs to each one of us. He is our only way to eternal life. Jesus said remaining in Him *“is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my*

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*commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.” (John 15:8-11)*

In the Gospel of Matthew 7:16-20, part of the Sermon on the Mount, I found some similar words, and they ring so true: Jesus said *“by their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.”* My friends, Jesus is speaking about our heart and who it belongs to – are you connected to the Vine? This is not about “works” or “salvation by works” but instead about “faith.” Is your faith connected to Jesus or to someone or possibly something else? In last week’s sermon, I spoke to you about ‘dethroning Jesus’ and putting someone or something else on the throne in place of Him. I don’t want to go there! Do you?

Remaining in Him, being in relationship with Him, is done through prayer and worship – and reading your Bible - intimately with Jesus – but it is also about being in Christian community with other believers – or “branches.” We cannot grow and produce fruit all by ourselves! Through prayer and worship we will be healthy “branches” connected to the “vine” – Jesus – and together produce good fruit. That is the way we do things – right now – we are so blessed to connect electronically, because we can’t come into communion together in person. But when we are able to gather together in person, then we will be having Bible Studies, Children’s church, Wednesday Night Christian Education – all to help cultivate each other, as well as young ones and younger ones, and even younger ones, you see, I think of children, God’s **children of all ages**. I am a child of God, so I am one of the ‘young ones.’ Even if you are 95 years old – you are a ‘young one’ in God’s eyes. Children of all ages, preparing each other to be connected to that vine and growing in Him – to be able to bear fruit – fruit that will last.