

Abiding Love: the Vine and the Branches

November 8, 2020

This week's lesson is from Jesus's "Farewell Discourse" in John's gospel. This is perhaps a good time to consider the dramatic differences between John's gospel and the others, the "synoptic" gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. As the lesson writer notes, the other gospels, as well as the first part of John's gospel, focus mostly on Jesus's external ministry, things like his teaching, parables, miracles of healing. In all there is material that comes specifically from Jesus's teaching to his disciples, without others around. There is much more of this in John than the others, with all of Chapters 13 to 17 dedicated to this "Farewell Discourse." Furthermore, the nature of what Jesus says in John's gospel is a bit different than what is in the others. You don't see the parables. You see extended discussion of a more abstract nature. The most direct and vivid contrast would come from first reading the "Sermon on the Mount" from Matthew, and then the "Farewell Discourse" from John. I can't help but wonder if this the same speaker.

It won't surprise you that my answer is yes. Part of that is just faith in the Holy and Blessed nature of the Bible itself. But, it's more than just that. There are differences in the writers. Mark was a younger disciple, who apparently reached maturity after the events of the Passion. The last Supper is thought to have been in the upper room of Mark's parents in Jerusalem. Mark later followed Paul and Barnabus in their first missionary journey out of Antioch, but left their company early for some reason. He was later in Rome with Peter. Tradition has it that he got most of what he wrote from Peter, but was not himself a witness to most of these things. Later, Luke (a gentile who traveled with Paul) and Matthew (who tradition says was one of the apostles, but may not be) used Mark as the foundation for their gospels. So, except for some of what Mark got from Peter, the material in the synoptic gospels can be thought of as what the World saw of Jesus: his public ministry and teaching.

Traditionally, John is considered to be authored by the apostle John, one of the sons of Zebedee, and "the beloved disciple" who was especially close to Jesus. (Consider 19:26-27.) Yet, John was compiled and put in circulation after the others, perhaps as late as the end of the first century, likely in Ephesus. Some traditions say that John went with Mary to Ephesus later, after Paul's time. If this gospel indeed preserves the memories of the apostle John, as the Church has always assumed, these words come from a source particularly close to Jesus. John was a

person with a very different point of view than Peter. Peter was impetuous and outspoken. John wasn't. Yet, he seems to have had a high standing in the early church. It was he who accompanied Peter to the Temple to preach after the Resurrection (Acts 3-4). He also seems to have had associations with the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem. He was with Peter in the courtyard of the high priest. (See 18:15.) John seems to have more to say than the other gospel writers about what the Jewish leadership was thinking and doing.

As I see it, we human beings are a very diverse lot. We have a variety of talents, "gifts of the spirit," as Paul would put it. Peter's calling was different from that of John. His perspective also differed from that of John. What he reports, as read in Mark, supplemented by additional sources in Matthew and Luke, varies quite a bit from what John includes in his gospel. John had the advantage of writing, or at least being compiled, later. There was no need to duplicate what was already in circulation in the other gospels. John gave us what he thought the Church needed at that time. We can be thankful for the treasures we find there, things like the story of Nicodemus and John 3:16, the woman at the well, and the material in the Farewell Discourse.

Chapter 15 begins with our scripture reading, the metaphor of the vine. The vine was an important symbol of Israel. It was an emblem of Israel on the Maccabean coins before Jesus's time. Israel is referred to as a vine by several of the prophets. Jesus calls himself the "true vine." That's interesting, because in all of those Old Testament images of Israel as a vine, that symbol is never used apart from the idea of degeneration. Israel the vineyard has "run wild" (Isaiah), "become a wild vine" (Jeremiah). So when Jesus says he is the true vine, he is also saying that no external qualification can make a man right with God, even being a Jew. Only friendship with Jesus can do that. I give thanks to Barclay for this material. Barclay also gives some additional good material I'm going to quote directly:

"The vine was grown all over Palestine, and still is. It is a plant that needs a great deal of attention if the best fruit is to be got out of it. It is grown most commonly on terraces. The ground has to be perfectly clean. It is sometimes trained on trellises; it is sometimes allowed to creep over the ground upheld by low forked sticks; it sometimes even grows round the doors of cottages; but wherever it grows careful preparation of the soil is essential. It grows luxuriantly and drastic pruning is necessary. So luxuriant is it that the slips are set in the ground at least twelve feet apart, for it will creep over

the ground at speed. A young vine is not allowed to bear fruit for the first three years and each year is cut drastically back to develop and conserve its life and energy. When mature, it is pruned in December and January. It bears two kinds of branches, one that bears fruit and one that does not; and the branches that do not bear fruit are drastically pruned back, so that they will drain away none of the plant's strength. The vine can not produce the crop of which it is capable without drastic pruning – and Jesus knew that.

“Further, the wood of the vine has the curious characteristic that it is good for nothing. It is too soft for any purpose. At certain times of the year, it was laid down by the law, the people must bring offerings of wood to the Temple for altar fires. But the wood of the vine must not be brought. The only thing that could be done with the wood pruned out of a vine was to make a bonfire of it and destroy it.”

(Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 2, revised edition, 1975, pp173-174)

15: 1 “I [Jesus] am the vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. 2 He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit, he prunes to make it bear more fruit.

A vine and its branches are one organism. Jesus says that is the way it should be with him and his disciples. Yet, the vine has no central nervous system; it's a plant. The vine does not control the branches; they each grow and react as their circumstances and their nature happen to be. But the vine supports the branches, and provides them with sustenance; they cannot live without the vine.

Jesus uses the Greek word “abide” (discussed in the lesson). Jesus also uses the word “friend,” also described, and meaning something considerably more than a Facebook acquaintance. The two words are related by the idea of closeness. One stays connected, in touch, with a true friend. They abide with each other in a deeper sense than just occupants of the same planet, connected only when one needs something from the other. Jesus draws on this meaning of “abide” and “friend” to describe his relationship with his disciples. “Like a vine and its branches” is a metaphor. It's a help in understanding, though not exact in every detail.

Again, quoting Barclay, “Abiding in Christ is something like that. The secret of the life of Jesus was his contact with God; again and again he withdrew into a solitary place to meet with him. We must keep in contact with Jesus.”

The problem we have with analogies and metaphors is recognizing their limits. Jesus uses the vine to illustrate this closeness that he shares with God and his disciples. Yes, disciples like branches have to expect to be pruned. We would like to bear fruit. God, the vinegrower, takes care of the vine and the branches in many ways like human vinetenders care for their vines. But the analogy is limited.

A human vinegrower usually cannot be said to love his vines. They are a crop. A human vinegrower does not feel sadness when having to prune or cut off individual branches. The purpose of the vine is to grow grapes to be harvested and sold or used to make wine. There is no sorrow in burning up the pruned branches; it's just a chore to be performed. God does not have that kind of relationship with us, the men and women of his creation. As Jesus makes clear in this same Farewell Discourse, God does love us, just as Jesus shows that love to his disciples as a reflection of God's love for us all.

Perhaps more important, when we see that someone is "pruned" from life here on earth, cut from the vine of the metaphor, that isn't necessarily because that person has been unfruitful and God is removing him or her for that reason. We see that; bad things do happen to good people. Fruitful people. We can think of names. I believe that Jesus does not intend, by this metaphor of the vine, to introduce that Deuteronomic perspective, that God gives earthly rewards for doing good and punishes with curses on earth those that do evil, cutting them from the vine of life.

The metaphor of the unfruitful branches being cast into the fire perhaps conjures images of the unfruitful Christian being cast into Hell. That is not what Jesus is saying. Yes, that was what was done with the worthless wood of the grape vine. And, all grape vines and branches eventually meet that fate. The metaphor is broken at this point; it has been stretched too far. Jesus calls on his disciples, and us, to love him, and abide in him, even as he loves and abides in the Father. He's not threatening his disciples with Hell.

Yes, as the lesson writer suggests toward the end of the lesson, we should occasionally pause to consider our "fruit." It's worth a look. But God does not promise results that we can see from being faithful to him. As God told Isaiah when he was given his call in Isaiah 8, as I paraphrase it, "You will speak but people won't listen." We should ask God to lead us and guide us. But let us be wary of judging ourselves, and even more so, others, by the fruit we can see. So

much of that perspective is subject to our imperfect eyes and other senses. We cannot necessarily see with accuracy.

The lesson writer says “growing good fruit is the goal.” Well, that is true of a grapevine. But let us be careful about how we interpret that. The author of our lesson lists works of social service. Those certainly have value. But, each one of us may have a different call.

If you were to judge the fruit of the various apostles by how often they are mentioned in the book of Acts, where would John be? Paul would be right at the top as number one. John is somewhere behind to Peter. Peter does all the speaking, in that brief episode in Acts, before John disappears from the New Testament record. Yet, here, independent of the epistles and Acts, and the recorded history of the Church, we have this marvelous gospel containing treasures not found elsewhere. The number of mentions in Acts simply is not a good metric for measuring fruits. Indeed, we have no good metric for measuring fruits, as if life were a contest to see who could pile up the most credits. These different apostles each had their own character and calling. John is introspective. He was writing, not acting. Paul was an extrovert, and a man of action. He (or Luke) was writing later, after the events. Peter was bold, and spoke his mind. He let Mark commit his sayings to writing. They all contributed, each in his own way, to conveying to us and all humanity the Gospel of Jesus Christ that we have in our Bible today. (Thanks to Cindy for this.)

So, be faithful to your own calling, whatever God wants you to do. These things will be your fruits, and you are answerable only to God. Not the pastor, not the lesson writer, nor any other human being. Only to God. And on that day, friendship with Jesus Christ will be the true salvation of us all, for we all fall short in various ways of what we might be. God knows that, as we are His. He loves us in a way that draws us to Himself, if we are but willing.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to understand who we are in relationship to you. Enable us to bear fruit worthy of the vine on which we absolutely depend. Prune us as necessary, but do not forsake us. For Jesus' sake we pray. Amen.