

May 10, 2009
The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
John 15:1-9
The Memory of Vines

During the festival of Passover, Jewish families gather around tables to celebrate Seder meals. The Seder is a wonderful ritual in which it is remembered how God delivered the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt long ago. On the table there is a roasted shankbone from a lamb as a reminder of the Passover sacrificial lamb; parsley as a symbol of hope; bitter horseradish to commemorate the bitterness of slave life; and stacks of unleavened matzoh bread. Glasses of wine are poured with an extra glass set out for the prophet Elijah just in case it is his time to return to earth. The wine is significant because the Israelite people saw themselves as a people planted in a new land and watched over by God like a grape vine is planted and cared for by a nurturing vinedresser. It's the language we heard read from Psalm 80, which speaks about how God "brought a vine out of Egypt that took deep root and filled the land."

Part of the Seder meal involves telling in detail what life was like back in Egypt and how God rescued the Israelites from their oppression. At one point everyone dips their fingers into their cup of wine and removes one drop of wine for each of the ten plagues inflicted upon the Egyptians to provoke them to let the Hebrew people go - plagues of frogs, gnats and flies; plagues of boils, hail and locust; plagues of deep darkness and the last plague of the death of every firstborn child. From the vine comes the wine, whose drops help people remember an Exodus act of freedom that happened long ago.

In John's gospel, while Jesus was at a meal with his disciples during the season of Passover, he looked at them and said, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower...I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:1,5). In remembering the ancient Exodus story, Jesus reminds all his disciples, then and now, about basic relationships that mark our lives: Christ is like the vine rooted in the work of the eternal Creator and onto which we are intimately connected like branches so we might bear good fruit. Even in this day and age of plastic-wrapped food and supermarket produce sections, we can relate to the beauty of this earthy symbol: Christ is a vine in the Lord's bountiful vineyard, and we are called to be branches existing on that vine, taking nourishment from that vine, thriving and bearing fruit because of that vine.

It is at this point that preachers usually go into extended expositions on the joy of gardening. With a twinkle in their eye, some might even say things like, There's a story about a female minister who was making a wooden trellis to support a climbing vine. She was working hard and pounding away at some stubborn nails when she noticed a little boy watching her. The youngster didn't say a word, so the preacher kept working, expecting the boy to leave. Pleased that her work was so fascinating to the boy, she finally said, "Well, young man, are you trying to pick up some pointers on gardening?" "No," he replied, "I'm just waiting to hear what a preacher says when she hits her thumb with a hammer."

Now I would never stoop to unnecessary excursions about gardening or silly bits of pulpit humor, especially today. That's because this entire theme about vines is rich in imagery and offers plenty of Christian insights. Nurturing vines in a vineyard takes both care and restraint. Vinedressers tell us that new branches have a natural tendency to grow along the ground, but they can't bear fruit down there. Their leaves get covered with dirt and when it rains, they get muddy and mildewed, making the branch useless. While it would seem that low-hanging vines would just get cut off and discarded, the vine growers know they are much too valuable for that. They go through the vineyard with a bucket of water, lifting the low vines up and washing them off, before wrapping them around a trellis or tying them up carefully. Soon these branches are thriving and bearing fruit.¹ That's an image that has lots of Christian overtones to it, such as seeing sin as the dirt covering the leaves of our life, and how God in baptism washes us and lifts us up so that we can bear fruit as part of the vineyard community of the church.

There's another detail about these grapevines that I find intriguing. Supposedly in California the vintners use lots of irrigation, but such practices are discouraged in France. The French believe that it's better to have one bad harvest than to later lose entire vineyards in a season of drought. By being cautious in how much you water your vines, the roots of the plants are made to go deep, deep into the earth until they reach groundwater and thus become resistant to drought.² What happens is that the vine nurtures a long memory, putting down deep roots so that it learns how life includes seasons of plenty and seasons of scarcity, times of rain and times of drought. But the vine knows that despite changing seasons, there is something deeper that sustains it, something fundamental that is ultimately trustworthy - just as there is something similar available in our lives; that which, by faith, we call God revealed in Christ, the vine onto which we are grafted as branches nourished and sustained by his gracious roots.

This is a deep topic. I don't want you to hear this as a simplistic sermon offering pulpit platitudes about God's care being available to us in both good times and bad. Yes, God does care for us in that way. God does wash us from dirt and sin and can lift us up into places so that we can bear fruit. But this concept is much deeper when we talk about the clinging dirt of drug and alcohol addictions that hold us as if in the jaws of a ravenous lion, or about depressions that suffocate us under thick blankets of despair. Yes, we each experience seasons of drought and seasons of plenty, and the Lord God is with us throughout. But that promise can be awfully hard to cling to when the job is lost or the marriage turns violent or the cancer returns.

Something incredibly deep is involved in the faith we profess and by which we are saved. Go back to that Seder meal I spoke about earlier. Seated around the table, each person dips a finger into a wine glass and removes a drop of wine for the ten plagues that came upon the Egyptians. This is more than just a ritual to count off some colorful details from an ancient story. It is intended to be a time to remember how the Egyptians suffered and how Egyptian blood was spilt. Although they were the oppressors and slave-holders, they were part of God's creation and their suffering must be recalled and

¹ Anecdotes from Homiletics Online.

² Cf. Paul V. Kollman, homily, August 24, 2003, *Notre Dame website*, campusministry.nd.edu.

mourned as well. Deep faith is always aware of others' suffering even in the midst of our own. Without that sensitivity, we risk worshiping a false god, one who exists solely for us instead of as the Lord and Savior active among all people, time and places.

Go back to the vineyard imagery we spoke about earlier. The gospel passage talks about pruning, a topic that likely no one is anxious to personalize. Our gardening experiences tell us that once flowers bloom, they have to be snipped off so that another blossom can appear. We know that cutting back certain branches needs to occur in order for the entire plant to thrive and prosper. But no one likes that image if you're the branch being pruned, if something in your life is being snipped off or cut back to the stem. It's true that the life of faith involves acts of discipline and acts of denial. There are things we must say "No" to in order to say "Yes" to God.

But theologian Walter Wink has suggested that the pruning metaphor is richer and goes deeper if we think of God as a gardener who grieves while watching a violent storm rip through a prized garden. Afterward the gardener tenderly prunes the injured plants in order to help them survive and restore them to beauty and harmony. Pruning is not to be associated with the tragedies that happen to us; pruning has more to do with clearing away the debris tragedies leave behind.³

A Passover ritual remembers not only the acts of salvation provided by a mighty God, but also mourns the suffering and loss felt by the people who, for a season, were the oppressors. A vineyard imagery tells us to nurture deep roots of faith, ones that dig down despite seasons of drought and hardship, ones that weather times of storm and acts of pruning, because in such roots are the memories we need to survive and prosper. And who is the host at the Passover table saying these words? Who is calling up the image of ancient Israel as the Lord's vineyard, the one who is pointing to the heavenly Gardener who knows us intimately and loves us unconditionally? The same One who endured loss and drought and death that we might know release and fullness and life. The One who says, *"Abide in me as I abide in you. A branch cannot bear fruit by itself. You cannot do this on your own. Abide in me. Abide in the fellowship that is my body. For as God has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love"* (Jn 15:4,9).

This is no superficial request. Think upon these things, and may the God of peace, the vine from which we draw our very lives, be with you.

AMEN

³ Walter Wink, "Abiding, even under the knife", *Christian Century*, April 20, 1994.