Growing to Thrive

This past Wednesday at 11:15 AM, when eight of us gathered to discuss today's readings at our midweek text study (which we call Connecting With The Word and to which all are invited), I remarked that perhaps the gospel – the good news – for today is found more easily in Mary Oliver's poem (what with its "hints of gladness," "hope of myself," invitation to "stay awhile," and being "filled with light") than in the excerpt of a sermon Jesus offered about the vine and the branches. As is the case for many poetic teachings by Jesus, this one was remembered only in the gospel according to John – not in the other three gospels that more closely align with one another. And yet, we will look for morsels of spiritual sustenance in Jesus' preaching as well. Harsh and imperfect though his vine metaphor may be, Jesus invites us consider growth in and with him as a path toward thriving.

As we enter into this time of reflection, we recognize with gratitude our freedom to be gathered for worship – on our live stream and in this space on land loved for ages by First Nations and others and where we are now practicing our way of community. I invite you to join me in a moment of prayer – closing your eyes if that helps to ground you in this moment.

Spirit of God, we want to keep growing, to keep becoming the persons and community you call us to be. Soften our hearts and minds this morning. Expand our perspectives so that we each perceive the ways in which you are nudging us to grow. And help us to keep evolving into the thriving community of faith you have created us to become. We ask all of this as disciples of Jesus. Amen.

Let's unpack Jesus' metaphor in order to glean encouragement and challenge that might support us in our growing as individuals and as a congregation. Jesus often named aloud his experience of God as a nurturing, fathering presence. In this reading from the gospel of John, Jesus envisions God as a gardener – a vine grower.

Jesus describes himself as “the true vine” and his disciples as branches of that vine. He encourages us to stay connected to him (to “live on in [him] and [he] does in us”) in order to bear fruit (by which I assume he means live faithfully in a way of love toward God, self, and neighbor). Thus far, I am with Jesus. I admire his ways of interpreting scripture. I am inspired by the stories of his many examples and calls to a life of love in action. I do experience a deep trust in a God that nurtures me and all of creation. I live out of a rootedness in Jesus.

That said, I want to share with clarity that the way in which Jesus is the true vine for me springs from my adoration of his actions and teachings as remembered in collected stories more so than from my sense of his essence as a person and bearer of the imprint of God’s love. I hope that you, too, find inspiration in the ways people remembered Jesus moving, teaching, healing, and facing oppressive powers without fear. And if part of your relationship with Jesus as the vine that connects you to our nurturing God has to do with Jesus’ essence as a person and a bearer of the imprint of God, I think that is also valid and beautiful.

Let’s explore for a moment those particularly gnarly verses in the middle of the gospel reading for today. I speak of these three lines:

“For apart from me you can do nothing.”

“Those who don’t live in me are like withered, rejected branches, to be picked up and throw on the fire and burned.”

“If you live on in me and my words live on in you, ask whatever you want, and it will be done for you.”

Ugh. Those words are among a handful of words in Christian scripture that have contributed to deep and lasting harm within our human community. I believe in my heart that Jesus’ teaching here was either misremembered or purposefully misconstrued.

Throughout the gospels, Jesus consistently demonstrated a fiercely open heart and creative spirit. Yet many of our Christian ancestors and contemporaries have drawn on these words to form a doctrine known as Christian exclusivity, which is the belief that humans can only receive salvation and eternal life through faith in Jesus.

We can practice some grace for Jesus. He was fired up. He knew his days were likely numbered at that point in his brief and very public ministry. His passion for the way of love and justice was palpable. He wanted people to be decisive. Jesus essentially told his disciples: You're either with me or you're not. I've laid out a vision. If you part ways with me, if you let yourself wither on the vine and reject the path by which our movement is receiving sustenance from God, then you're likely to break off and return to the Earth some other way.

Jesus invites us to stay connected with him in a path of discipleship and grieves that we sometimes stray and fail to bear fruit. In effort to control people, some have coopted Jesus' words to prop up ideas about us versus them that lead to the other landing in eternal torture by fire in an afterlife.

Some will also take the following words and run with them as a through line in their lives of faith: *"If you live on in me and my words live on in you, ask whatever you want, and it will be done for you."* I wish that a boldly confrontational type would have spoken up, asking Jesus to pause, letting him know he was going a bridge too far. Jesus was talking to his own very oppressed community. And let's be honest, inexplicable and unjust human suffering has been a reality since as long as humans have existed.

Today, there is a thread within our diverse Christian community that has been said to adhere to a prosperity gospel – a belief that all will go well and work out more and more abundantly for a person if they stick to a belief that Jesus is the only way to salvation and further stick to a particular subset of beliefs and practices.

I trust that Jesus was more nuanced in his thinking, even if his words have landed in harsh limiting ways both then and now. Perhaps Jesus hoped we would make a mental leap with him. If we join him in a core mission of living out God's love and justice and stay fiercely connected to that vine, all for which we deeply long and all for which we ask God's help will come out of our connection to that mission. And we can be assured that God will absolutely be present and powerful as we work out responses to our longings to be connected to love and justice.

In our community as a congregation, we are seeking o follow Jesus as teacher, healer, savior, and friend – our vine. We are like trees planted and growing (as our children embodied for us) – planted and growing more deeply and more broadly. I encourage us to be on the lookout for opportunities we offer to one another to be growing along the vine.

I think of two examples this morning. Connecting With The Word – this opportunity to gather each week to consider the readings for the Sunday to come. It is a way of going deeper in our rootedness and in our growth – in our individual spirits and in our relationships with one another.

And then we have our Community Collective (meeting again this week) an opportunity that our Social Justice Team created and which has now become more populated by our wider community even than those within our congregation. The tagline is "social justice in the valley" and we think of ourselves as neighbors building a community of justice. In that way, we are the branches – connecting and affecting each other in wider and wider circles of love and justice. We do these things, inspired by Jesus – our vine.

I also encourage us to look on the horizon for ways we will continue to stretch more deeply and more broadly. I was reviewing our congregation's strategic plan and I am excited for the work to come.

Do you recall that it says, *"The Local Outreach Team and the Social Justice Team, or representatives of each, will work together to create and enact a unified approach to mission-related activities that is consistent with values, vision, and mission"?* That will be a way for us to continue to branch outward from rootedness in our core values on the vine of Jesus.

We also have ahead of us an objective to *"Optimize use of church buildings in alignment with values, vision, and mission."* Imagine how we can continue to develop our relationships by optimizing the use of our abundant resources!

I encourage us this week to watch for opportunities to continue to grow more deeply and more broadly in our personal lives and as a congregation.

I wonder**: How might we each and together stretch toward greater depth and breadth such that we live in fruitfulness in the way of Jesus?**

In such living, might we (with the trees) experience "hints of gladness"? Love is counting on us. Amen.

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St. Croix United Church (Bayport, MN)
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John 15:1-9, "When I Am Among the Trees"