

Sunday, April 29, 2018
Fifth Sunday of Easter (Year B)
Acts 8.26-40; 1 John 4.7-21; John 15.1-8
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

I have a confession to make. Today's Gospel reading always makes me feel a little inadequate. But not for the reason you might think.

You see, I come from a long line of "green thumbs." All my grandparent had wonderful gardens. They all had beautiful beds of flowers and lush green plants in front of their homes. And in the summer, they always had vegetable gardens with delicious tomatoes and other assorted veggies. My mother inherited their abilities. She has roses in her back yard, flowers in the front yard, and lots of potted plants throughout her house. She likes plants so much that for years I have sent her some sort of plant for Mother's Day. A number of years ago I sent her a *Ficus benjamina*, no more than six inches tall. Now, years later, that ficus is taller than I am and fills a corner in Mom's family room. Such is her gift with plants. And my sister is the same. Every summer she plants all sorts of vegetables in her back yard and has fresh herbs pretty much all year round.

Me? Not so much. The plant-growing gene seemed to have skipped right over me, leaving me with a brown thumb. One year, back in the mid-90s, I went on a trip. While I was away, my sister looked after my house. When I came home, I walked in the house and noticed that all my houseplants were gone. I immediately called up Lisa and asked her what happened to my plants. She screamed into the phone, "they were dying!" I asked her again what had happened to them, and she repeated, "they were dying!" She then told me that she had taken them to her house to nurse them back to health. She said that I could have them back only if I promised to take better care of them.

I went over to Lisa's house to retrieve my plants, and swore that I would take better care of them. She reluctantly allowed me to take them home. Not before she reminded me, "they were dying!" Well, they didn't do so well once I got them back home. I would get busy and forget to water them. I would notice when they started wilting. Invariably, I would be too busy in the moment. "Oh, I'll water them later." Then I would forget. This routine would go on until they were near death. I would then try to nurse them back to life, pruning away the dead leaves and branches, in hopes of new growth. With mixed results. Years later, I have learned my lesson. The only plants I now have at home are an arrangement of succulents on my balcony. And these only manage to stay alive because of the ambient moisture in the coastal air. Otherwise, they too would probably have gone the way of all flesh – and all other plant life in my home.

So, you see, Jesus' talk about vines growing and bearing fruit naturally makes me a little nervous. Particularly when you consider that he likens our lives of faith to being branches that are meant to bear fruit. If I can't keep a simple green plant alive, how can I be expected to grow anything that might produce fruit?

Of course, I know that Jesus' talk about vines and fruit are just a metaphor for the life of faith, and he is clear who is in control when he says, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower" (Jn 15.1). I don't need to be the grower. That job is already taken. Jesus is very clear on our respective roles. "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 15.5). According to Jesus, our role is twofold. To abide and to bear fruit.

Abide is one of those words we don't use that much anymore. But it means to live, to dwell, to remain, to stay, to continue. It carries with it the sense of stability, faithfulness – and qualities associated with plants, rootedness and groundedness. What Jesus is getting at in calling himself the vine in which we are to abide, is that he is the very source of our life. If you remember your high school biology, the plant, rooted in the soil, draws in nutrients. The trunk or stalk or vine transports those nutrients to the branches, giving life and growth. Jesus, the vine, rooted in the love of God, spreads that life-giving love through himself to us, giving us life and the means of growth.

Baptism is one of the primary means of us abiding in Christ. It is the means by which we are brought into the Body of Christ. By which we are grafted onto the vine that is Christ. The vine is also a metaphor for the Christian community. At once the Body of Christ in a metaphorical sense, but also rooted in the love of God through Christ. An outward and visible sign and the means of our abiding in him.

We see an early example of incorporation into the Body of Christ, into the vine that is the community of the faithful, in our reading from Acts. The Ethiopian eunuch does not fully understand what he is reading in scripture. But with the help of Philip, he becomes grounded in the good news of Jesus Christ in order to truly grow in his life of faith. And moved by the outpouring of the Spirit, he is baptized – grafted onto the vine, forming a new branch of the Christian tradition, extending down into Africa. A branch that flourishes to this day and continues to grow and spread, bearing much good fruit.

Our second role as branches of this vine that is the community of faith abiding in Christ is to bear fruit. In its simplest sense, bearing fruit means loving God and loving one another. Or more appropriately, loving God by serving one another in love. The root of this is found in our Epistle reading from the First Letter of John. John tells his readers that first, "God is love" (1 Jn 4.8). And then how "God's love was revealed [when] God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him" (1 Jn 4.9). And he then recalls Jesus' commandment to his disciples at the Last Supper to love one another as he has loved us. As John tells us "those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also." (1 Jn 4.20b-21).

Bearing fruit is literally rooted in love. Love that is an outgrowth, an expression, a response to the love God first had for us. Love that was expressed in the ultimate way – through the death and resurrection of God's only Son. That we demonstrate our love for God by loving others. Or put another way by Jesus in the Gospel according to John, "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples" (Jn 15.8). By following his example.

It is the love of God flowing through Christ that energizes us, nurtures us, and gives us what we need to bear fruit in our own lives of faith. In our own life as a faith community. And this place certainly bears much fruit! Have you ever stopped to consider just how much fruit we actually bear on this branch of the vine called St. Gregory's Episcopal Church?

Just look at our outreach projects for this year. The Easter basket drive, Soles for Souls, the collection of supplies for the Pine Ridge Reservation, the collection of birthday gifts for patients at Miller Children's Hospital, the back-to-school back pack drive, the collection of supplies for the animal shelter, and the Thanksgiving food baskets and Christmas gift baskets for families in need. And of course, there are the ongoing outreach projects – the Food Bank and Feed My Lambs. And we are adding opportunities to work with other churches in Long Beach on homes for Habitat for Humanity. And the Men's Fellowship is looking into establishing a Laundry Love ministry here in Long Beach. All these, signs of new growth in our outreach efforts. New ways of demonstrating God's love flowing through his vine, Jesus Christ, allowing us to bear fruit in the world.

We also bear much fruit within our own walls. We have a thriving hospitality and fellowship ministry, in the form of the Junior and Senior Supper Clubs, the ECW, the Men's Fellowship, and the Hospitality Committee which provides food for coffee hours and other events. We have various opportunities for education and spiritual growth through our Bible Study, Sunday School, and Youth Group programs. All of these being ministries that seek to nurture our own members in their lives of faith and spiritual growth. And this year we are continuing our partnership with Los Altos United Methodist Church as we again host and participate in the Groundlings Summer Day Camp program. Further growing the vine and branches to reach beyond denominational divides, and bearing fruit in exciting new ways.

And we are diligently working to establish a Stephen Ministry program here at St. Gregory's. A program to provide increased, intensive pastoral care to those in need of being nurtured through a variety of life's hurts and challenges. Yet one more way we are seeking to bear fruit and to demonstrate the love of God in real and personal ways. And that will help others grow and bear fruit in their own lives of faith.

Really, any of our programs or ministries that connect people to each other, that feed and nourish God's people in body, mind, or spirit, is a form of bearing fruit. A means of furthering the love of God in tangible ways. And while we are always looking at new ways of bearing fruit, we are also continually assessing and discerning what things need to be pruned away to free up energy and resources to allow for new growth to occur.

I may not have a green thumb when it comes to plants, but I thank God that I don't have to worry about making things grow in this place. Well, I kinda do, since I'm the head of this community, this branch. While I can't make the growth happen, I can guide. I can support. I can nurture. All the while trusting that the real work of growth comes through the love of Christ flowing through and working in each of us. And that if we continue abiding in Christ, who loves us and nurtures us, and gives us what we need to grow and blossom, we will continue to bear fruit in amazing ways.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!
(The Lord is Risen indeed! Alleluia!)