

Of Grapes and Cucumber Salad

Fifth Sunday of Easter
The Rev. Dr. J. Stewart Hardy

Sunday, May 10, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22:25-31;
1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

Grace, mercy, and peace to you, from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

There once was a gardener who set out to grow cucumbers because of his great delight and passion for cucumber salads. He had been very careful to select the absolutely best seeds and to plant each one at its absolutely correct depth and distance. He fertilized and watered the plants; he worked the soil faithfully every week to prevent the weeds from encroaching; he sprayed to prevent bugs and blights from afflicting the young plants. He was determined to raise a bumper crop which would make for delicious eating as gourmet cucumber salads throughout the summer. Mouth watering, don't you agree?

The people of God had a vine in which they also delighted – the grapevine. It was often used to make a point in a story, or in an argument, or during instruction. Take for instance, the Old Testament which, in its earliest passages, refers to a choice vine that God brought out of Egypt and planted in the best possible location; the name of the vine was Israel. So it is that one of the most powerful biblical images of God's relationship with His people grew and developed through the scriptures. The image was so powerful because the vine, the grape, and the wine produced were at the very heart and center of Israel's life.

It is this very image upon which Jesus builds when he speaks of Himself as the true vine. Our gospel reading this morning comes from what has come to be known as the "farewell discourses" in which Jesus (in the Gospel of John, at least) tries to equip His followers to deal with the future and the forms their discipleship might take. It's a future in which they will have to face their tasks without Jesus being physically to them; they'll be on their own, so to speak (or so they thought).

But isn't that precisely where we are, beloved? Gathered together here in a community of faith, and determined to live as best we can, walking in Jesus' footsteps? Nonetheless, it really seems, doesn't it, as if we're left to this whole business on our own? So it is that Jesus addresses this very situation using the analogy of the grapevine to help us understand that we are, in fact, far from being left alone in the world. He says, "I am the true vine, and my father is the vinegrower. . . . Abide in me as I abide in you."

Here there is no isolation, but relationship and connectedness. As we dwell in Christ, the vine, so we are cared for by His father, the vinegrower. In that relationship, we are connected to the source of life, and care, and love, and hope. It's a relationship in which we come to realize that we really are secure and firmly held in the love of God in and through Christ. There is nothing in all creation, as Paul puts it, that can separate us from that love; it's a loving relationship which

is enhanced and strengthened by regular attendance at worship, by reading and thinking about and mediating upon scripture, and through corporate and personal prayer.

Just so, our cucumber gardening enthusiast who planted his cucumbers provided them with care and nurture, and watched his plants flourish. The season also was helpful with rain and sunshine. On the vines, broad green leaves grew in abundance and in due course, promising blooms appeared. His mouth watered at the magnificent sight and thoughts of his cucumber harvest.

Then came the day when the gardener noticed that here and there some leaves were dying and some blooms were beginning to fade. Why, he wondered, why would some die in the midst of such a great living thing? He investigated, stepping carefully among the tangled mass of vines, he traced the ones on which the leaves and the blooms were dying until he found that they were not connected to the stem of the plant. There, just above the ground – cut worms had severed the stalk and the entire vine above that point was dying because it was no longer attached to the roots and the stem that had produced it.

Just so for us, beloved, there are “cut worms” (if you will) that separate us from Christ the vine. Sometimes, they are so subtle that we are hardly even aware of what’s happening – responsibilities and obligations arise that draw us away from worship. We miss a Sunday here and there, and then we miss a month and before long, we no longer have time to come to Sunday services for we have so much else to do. And then there are difficulties and obstacles which confront us in our lives, or we encounter crises that leave us hurt and anguished – we lose a job, we are betrayed or stabbed in the back by someone in our congregation or synod, we suffer the pain and agony of divorce – and in no time at all we find ourselves blaming God, or finding that the response of our congregation is inadequate or non-existent for what we think we need, or finding that our prayers are seemingly unanswered and we withdraw, angry and deeply disappointed. So the “cut worms” of life can separate us from the vine.

But what if each of these sufferings is not so much a cutting off which, while painful, is an actual opportunity for growth, for a new life, for a better way of being? Here Jesus’ message is clear: His Father is the vinegrower. While the vinegrower attends the soil and nurtures the vine, he also comes into the vineyard with a knife and every plant is cut; some are cut away because they are fruitless and some are pruned in order that they might become more fruitful. Those in the community for which the gospel was originally written, may well have found in the process of pruning an analogy to illuminate their own corporate experience. They counted among their numbers many who, like the blind man of the ninth chapter of John, had experienced a harsh excommunication from the synagogue and with that, separation from family and friends.

Though pruning is painful, it really does have a positive intent: to improve the strength and growth of the plants and prompt more fruitfulness. But the vinegrower is ever present, offering compassion and care and new opportunities for faithful living. The mutuality between Jesus and the disciples spoken of here is both a gift of God’s grace and the call to a task. It declares that just like the disciples, we are branches and the divine Gardner is at work to make those branches more productive. Just as it is in the life of the vine, so it is for us. The branches in the vine of Christ don’t have to force themselves to grow; we don’t have to make a resolution to bring forth

sweeter and more succulent fruit; we don't need to remind ourselves to be more abundant in our production – we simply need to be in the right place, the place that the vinegrower has prepared for us, the place where the conditions for growth and fruit-bearing are to be found. For us, the right place to be is in the vine that has been planted and tended by God, the vine which we call Christ.

Beloved, each one of us here today, as people who profess that Jesus is our Lord and believe in our hearts that He rose from the dead, are part of the vine of Christ. We are able to produce tremendous quantities of fruit, though we may not be given the gift to see what we have produced; but the conditions are perfect for our growth because God himself tends us and ensures that those conditions are perfect. All we have to do to remain fruitful is to remain part of the vine and perform the simple tasks that every branch performs as a means of maintaining a fruitful life in the vine. So it is that we are commissioned to be instruments of God's grace and channels of His love – to one another, to our families – today especially to our mothers, to those with whom we work, and to those we meet in everyday life.

Just so, our cucumber gardener went to work with a passion to reduce the impact of the cutworms. He continued to nurture and care for the plants, and that summer his crop of cucumbers was enormous. And the cucumber salads they made – oh my, they were absolutely delicious!

Amen.