

The Fifth Sunday of Easter, 28 April 2024
Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa
James Knutsen

[5 Easter B: Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22:24-30; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8]

I remember hearing this Gospel passage when I was a teenager in the 70s, deeply involved in a group of Jesus people that, looking back, it's pretty easy to identify as something of a cult. Looking back, I can see how unhealthy it was, how fear, manipulation and dishonesty were always there just under the surface, but could not be acknowledged, because, well, we were all, supposedly, saved and living in the light, and loving one another. For those of you who have heard me talk about my experience of being sexually abused, yes, this is the context in which it happened.

Today's Gospel is one of the passages I remember from back then:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit... Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

At that time and in that situation, the import seemed clear: You better bear fruit, or else! And in that time and in that situation, there was no ambiguity about what "bearing fruit" meant: it meant "witnessing" in such away that others were "brought to Christ" and "born again", you know, like us.

And I, for reasons I didn't understand, could never bring myself or get myself to "witness" in that way. So this was a fearful passage for me. At the time, being part of this group of believers felt absolutely vital to me—I was getting a kind of love and attention there that I wasn't finding at home.

Looking back, I can see that deep down, I knew something wasn't right about all this. Looking back,

I can see how an undercurrent of fear was pervasive in the life of that community. I couldn't make of it a truth that I could speak without fear from my own heart.

It was a mess, and yet Jesus was there. I'm still sorting through how to make sense of all that.

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There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear... whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.

In a way, John is giving us an extraordinary diagnostic, a discerning question for all Christians. What is the driving energy here? Fear? Or Love?

I think it's a bold and absolutely accurate insight, that fear and love are opposites, and that we, at every moment, find ourselves somewhere on that spectrum, from total fear, to perfect (that is, complete) love. From this perspective, perhaps the greatest possible apostasy or heresy is to turn Christianity into a religion of fear, and so of control and hate, and we live in a time when this is rampant around the world, most notably today perhaps in Russia and in the United States.

Of course, in my fear I was missing what Jesus is actually saying in John 15—not a threat: bear fruit (narrowly defined) or else!—but a promise: abide in me and (in due season—this *is* a horticultural metaphor, after all) you *will* bear fruit.

But even to focus on that might be to miss the truly astonishing promise: that Christ *does* abide in us: through our baptism; through his words that nourish us and draw us more deeply into his love, through sharing the mysteries of his Body and Blood, and

through our practice of loving one another. (And, before all this, we are *created* in him and for him).

Our abiding in Christ is simply about cultivating the presence of Christ that is always already present, abiding within us. And trusting in the promise—*faith*—is a key aspect of relaxing into the abiding that will show forth in the fruit that is promised.

This is one way of expressing the message of Jesus's resurrection: the discovery, the revelation, that Christ is always already present everywhere and in everything and everyone. We humans have the capacity to recognize and cultivate that presence in ourselves and one another, or to refuse it, quash it, deny and starve it.

But ultimately, as Paul writes in Romans (8:38f), there is nothing, *nothing* that can separate us from the love of Christ. It is woven into the fabric of our being, into all creation.

The vine extends everywhere, and its fruit is love.

The spirit of Christ is already present in the Ethiopian eunuch, already resonating within him as he reads and ponders the prophet Isaiah on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza, before Philip joins him to connect the dots from Isaiah's prophecy to the death and resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit, just as Christ is present today in Jerusalem and Gaza, in this horrific war that grinds on and on among the children of Abraham, calling us to truth, calling us to love, calling us to reconciliation, calling us all to the recognition of the image of God and the presence of God in every human being, the recognition that in every human being we are given the opportunity to love God, or not.

Today's reading from the First Letter of John puts it starkly:

Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.

So, loving God is every bit as easy, and every bit as difficult, as loving another human being, loving every human being that we encounter.

How is it for you, loving people?

Easy? Difficult?

I'll tell you, I am *not* an expert in love.

I would be surprised if any of us said we never found anyone difficult to love. (And what about loving ourselves?) But in the perspective John is opening up for us here, perhaps these are the people we might actually be most grateful for, for it is these people who challenge us to learn what love is, who offer us the opportunity to learn to love God.

We ought not be surprised if we find the path of love to be the way of the cross.

But always, "in the beginning, God."

In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

God meets our failure to love, our sin, with the at-one-ment of Emanuel, God-with-us: Jesus, wholly human, wholly God, fearlessly giving himself as the grain of wheat falling into the earth and dying, in order to bear fruit among us, in our love for one another, which *is* our love for God.

We are not asked to love before being loved. Abide in the vine. Meditate on the words of Jesus. Recognize the sap of infinite love at the core of your being, and that loving one another *is* abiding in the vine.

Bit by little bit, more and more, let love overcome fear. That *is* the journey.

These readings today from 1 John and the Gospel of John are perhaps most remarkable for the way they proclaim the integral call to contemplation *and* action. The call first of all to receptivity, to abide in the vine, absorbing the sap of divine love, and *then* the call to let that love flow from us to others, especially the others who challenge and confound us.

If we are overwhelmed by the needs of the world, of our siblings near and far, then all the more are we invited to contemplation, to root ourselves again and again in the love of Christ, and then, as best we can, to love one another. So we learn to inhale and exhale the breath of God, the wind of the new creation, the Holy Spirit.

When the Spirit tells Philip to join up with the Ethiopian eunuch, I think Philip is being taught to love. Here he encounters a black-skinned foreigner who belongs to a sexual minority. By his upbringing Philip would most likely tend to dismiss, diminish, exclude this person, to treat him as a second-class citizen, *if that*, among God's people.

But Philip has the Spirit of Love at his back. He's being stretched. It's interesting to note that the thought of baptism for the eunuch doesn't seem to occur to Philip himself; he's still catching up to what the Spirit is doing here; he's learning to love. It's the eunuch himself who has the chutzpah to say:

Look! Here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?

What indeed?

What is to prevent us from abiding in the vine, and loving one another?