

5th Sunday of Easter—Year B

John 15:1-8

May 2, 2021

Alleluia! Christ is risen! Christ is risen, indeed! Alleluia! Amen!

My mom helped me pick out what dress I was going to wear to kindergarten each morning. She would also help me choose my socks, and after I slid my feet into the shoes, she tied the laces. Before heading out the kitchen door, she brushed my shoulder-length hair, took the comb and made a part on the left side, and then put a barrette in to hold the hair back from my face. Inevitably, though, I would yank the barrette out and place it where I wanted it, which was about an inch away from the part. Although years later I realized how ridiculous I must have looked, my independent nature drove me in telling my mom, "I can do it myself!"

While this is a simplistic illustration, haven't we all said at one time or another, "I can do it myself." or "I don't need your help."? We believe in pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps, and encouraging others to do the same. Whether in our professional or personal lives, we pride ourselves in being Lone Rangers. Our culture celebrates rugged individualism and distrusts the communal. We often view dependence as a moral weakness. We cherish our personal space, and feel claustrophobic when other people press too close.

This individualism also spreads into our spiritual lives, resulting in a "me and Jesus" mentality and putting a lot of stock in our personal spiritual experiences, whether they be in prayer life, worship, or epiphanies. And while we believe in loving our neighbors, we feel most comfortable loving them from a distance, or at least with one eye trained on the nearest exit. When we do align ourselves with a larger Christian community, we generally do so with a consumer mindset, trusting that we're free to join up and free to quit as personal preference dictates.

Given this context, it's hard to imagine a more counter-cultural and challenging vision of the Christian life than the one Jesus offers us in this week's gospel reading. He tells his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion, *"I am the vine, and you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me, you can do nothing."* If these words aren't blunt enough, he continues, *"Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned."* Burned? Gulp. Goodbye, Lone Ranger. Hello.....branches?

While touring local vineyards over the years, I have seen that grapevines are messy, curly, and jumbly things. They stretch, spread, and invade, growing in all kinds of tangled up directions, with the densely interwoven branches being just about indistinguishable from each other. I've also learned that the best grapes are produced closest to the central vine, where the nutrients are the most concentrated.

Jesus uses this very 1st century, as well as 21st century, imagery to describe the relationship he promises his disciples for when he is no longer physically present. He assures them that their relationship with him will not end in death, but will be an ongoing one. He tells his disciples on that evening, as well as you and I this morning, that he promises a productive and full life for all who are connected to him. He uses the word abide 8 times in just these 8 verses! The only thing they need to do is to abide, which in today's words means to remain, cling, depend, commit, endure, to hang in there for the long haul with him. Abide is to stay rooted in place, but at the same time, it is also to grow, to change, and to multiply. It's a vulnerable-making verb: if we abide, we'll get pruned. It's a risky verb: if we abide, we'll bear fruit that others will see and taste. It's a humbling verb: if we abide, we'll have to accept nourishment that is not of our own making. And it's a relentlessly communal verb – if we abide, we will have to coexist with our fellow branches, whether we want to or not.

Jesus says, *"I am the vine, you are the branches."* You ARE, not you will be. This is most certainly good news! It's a done deal for us. God in Jesus has initiated and "sealed the deal" for us on the cross of Good Friday and then the empty tomb on Easter, as God has claimed life eternal for all God's people. In the waters of our baptism, God has permanently grafted us onto this vine, this one true source of life, Jesus Christ. In these waters, Christ has promised us that no matter what happens – a once-in-a-century pandemic, racial and economic injustices, illness, job loss, or any other hardship – he will be with us and bring all things to a good end. Moreover, by him abiding in us, he makes his much-needed appearance in the fruits of his Spirit through us – those fruits being love, joy, peace, patience, and kindness – for a world that is desperately broken and hungry for them.

Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz Weber said it best – *"Christianity is a lousy religion for the 'I'll do it myself' set"*! Our lives are indeed bound up in Christ and in each other's. The only true life we will live in this world is a life rooted in Christ and inextricably with others, both those alike as well as those different from us, messy and entangled though it might be. Thanks be to God for making us all branches on the one true living vine, the crucified and risen Jesus Christ! Alleluia! Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen.