

## **Sermon April 28, 2024**

### **Children's Time**

Have you ever noticed that when Jesus was teaching, he often told stories to help his followers understand what he wanted them to learn? Well, he did, and our Bible lesson today is one of the stories. If Jesus had given his stories a title, he might have called this story "The Vine and the Branches." This story was about grapevines. He chose the grapevine for this story because in the land where Jesus lived, there were many grapevines and he knew that his followers would know a lot about grapevines.

I don't know if you have ever seen a grapevine, but there are two parts to the grapevine. There is the vine—and there are the branches growing out of the vine. The grapes grow on the branches. That is pretty much like any fruit tree that you might have seen. They have a trunk and branches with fruit growing on the branches. The only way that a branch can have fruit on it is for it to remain connected.

Jesus wanted his followers to understand as he told his story about the grapevine. He wanted them to understand how important it was for them to stay connected to him. He told them, "I am the vine and you are the branches. If you remain in me, you will have much fruit, but apart from me, you can do nothing."

Jesus wants you and me to produce fruit in our life. He wants us to be kind, gentle, generous, and loving. Can we do that on our own? No way. Just as the branches must be connected to the vine before they can produce fruit, you and I must stay connected to Jesus to produce the good fruit that God expects of us. If we keep our life connected to Jesus, we will grow. Our life will produce beautiful leaves and delicious fruit. But if we are separated from Jesus, our leaves will wither and die and we will never put forth any fruit.

Let's pray and ask God to help us to remain faithful in following Jesus and his teaching.

O God, we ask you to help us to be faithful followers of Jesus and produce much fruit in our life. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## **John 15:1-8**

### **Jesus the True Vine**

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. God removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit, God prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the Word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. 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. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

### **Growing In God**

Take a moment and try to picture God. What images come to mind? What words would you use to describe God? What feelings rise to the surface?

(Invite to call out)

The writer of 1 John takes these pictures and descriptions that whirl through our minds and condenses them down to one word: LOVE.

Tina Turner once sang "What's Love got to do with it?" Today's scriptures answer that question with a resounding "Everything! Love has Everything to do with it!!"

Love... so much packed into one little word.

“Beloved!” writes the author of 1 John, “let us love one another, because love is from God.” Love is the answer to every question... love is the solution to every problem... The letter goes on to say that “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God.” Those who live lives of love, live lives filled with God’s love. End of story.

But don’t get up to leave yet... I can always add a little more.

The fact is – we are all connected and interconnected and intertwined like grapes on a grapevine. It’s true for you here in this place, where many of you are connected by generations of marriage and friendship. And it is true for the billions of faithful who gather in Jesus’ name somewhere throughout the spectrum of time-- singing and praying... hoping that God’s Beloved Community will break forth right before our eyes. We are connected by the One who calls us in love and sends us out to share that love. It is this, more than anything else, that connects us, like that fruit on the vine. Woven together, intertwined in ways that are inseparable.

In the words of another old pop song, Love will Keep Us Together!

And these eternal promises of love come to us when we need them most, as we struggle to understand what our new normal looks like and feels like. I think we all would agree that the world could certainly use a little more love as we move forward.

People think that hate is the opposite of love, but today we are reminded that it is really fear. Fear makes our hearts cold. And there’s a lot of fear and anxiety in this world right now. We are a world still healing from the effects of Covid and wondering what catastrophe will come around the corner next. And its not just pandemics – its the fears of civil unrest and political discord and wars raging that continue to tear families and communities apart.

And, of course there are the more personal fears and anxieties that each of us carry – the ones that wake you up at 3 am. Sometimes never spoken out loud but carried on your shoulders and weighing you down.

And here, the shared fear here that many of you have expressed -- that those who have left the church will not find us again. That the powerful words of God and Christ will be unheard. There are so many who could be moved by today's beautiful words of love and comfort.

Really, when you put it all together –

We fear losing connection with one another.

Fear stops us from acting in a loving way. We act like grapes that have fallen from the vine, losing life and vitality. We lose what we need the most.

So, I say this to you today: **fear not**. In the words of the angels... In the words of Jesus himself: **Fear not!**

There is no fear in love. Love casts out fear. And where do we find this love that is powerful enough to cast out fears, like light casts out darkness? You already know the answer – we find love in God.

*"God is Love,"* John's letter says, "and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."

If you look to the New Testament the word that was translated as "abide," you will find it means to live with... to sojourn... to continue... to be held. So, when we live in love, we are HELD in God and when we love, God is HELD in us. God is Love and we are literally hugged by that love! What a wonderful thing to hear in these times when we are not able to reach out and hug one another the way that we want to! And the embrace continues throughout our lives: as sojourners, we travel forward... and no matter where we are in life's journey, we continue to embrace and be embraced by God's love.

Held tight in God's loving arms, we find our own place. When God abides in us, we are God's holding place – we are God's abode... God's apartment... God's house. We are God's own home!

And why does God choose to live in each of us? Just because! Not because we are good enough or right or worthy... not because of what we have or where we live...

God chooses to live in us just because of love.

The fact is, Jesus didn't choose who to love. Jesus didn't categorize us as good or bad, right or wrong, worthy or unworthy. In fact, many of the people that Jesus surrounded himself with were the ones that the rest of society shunned or pushed aside... the ones who were deemed bad, wrong and unworthy.

For God's home to thrive, that love needs to spread out until it covers every part of our world. It needs to seep into the broken rubble of war torn countries and the desolation of communities that are picking up the pieces after the economic, mental and physical health toll left behind after covid... and God's love needs to take root today in Manchester and communities all over the world that are filled with people just like you and me.. and then grow like a vine and bear fruit. God's Love, spread by you and me, needs to be found everywhere. We are the fruit! Offering God's love to everyone, and it all starts right here.

Right here... right now... In this place, we can experience God's transformative, extravagant, never-ending creative love. And as that Love pours down upon us, like a spring rain on a newly planted grapevine, we will take root and truly abide in and embrace the Love that has been so freely given. May it be so. Amen

## **Installation of Consistory President**

Siblings in Christ, baptized into the priesthood of Christ we are called to offer ourselves as disciples of Christ in thanksgiving for what Christ has done and continues to do for us. It is our privilege to recognize and support those who are engaged in the work of this congregation.

When someone steps aside from the obligations of the consistory, the consistory can fill the open positions. Elwin Wagner has agreed to fill the open position of Consistory President, and I now invite you to come forward to be installed.

### **Installation**

In Holy Baptism, Christ Jesus liberated you from sin and death and welcomed you to this Holy Community. Your faith has been nurtured through Word and Sacrament. Now this community of faith has embraced you in special leadership roles.

In his letter to the Corinthian Church, Paul wrote that there are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but that they are given by the same Spirit. There are different ways to serve Christ but the same Christ is served. There are different abilities to perform service but the same God gives us the abilities. The Spirit's presence is shown in some way in each and every person.

### **To Consistory**

You have accepted the office to which you have been elected or appointed. Do you promise, with the God as your helper, to faithfully fulfill its duties?

**I do, with the help of God.**

God has endowed each of us with unique gifts and talents for the work of the church and of ministry. Will you accept this church office in proportion

to your faith to lead with diligence, and to lead God's people according to your discernment of God's will?

**I will, with the help of God.**

Do you covenant and promise that you will walk together in love for one another, and exercise affectionate watchfulness over all those given to your charge?

**I will, with the help of God.**

Will the Congregation please stand:

People of God, will you support these, your elected leaders, and will you share in the mutual ministry that Christ has given to all who are baptized?

**We will, with the help of God.**

I now declare you installed as a consistory member of this congregation. God bless you with the Holy Spirit, so that you may prove faithful servants of Christ.

Let us pray: We give thanks, O God, for all who offer themselves in Your name. Grant them the joy of service and constant care and guidance. May we all be willing disciples and thankful recipients of ministry, that Your name be glorified, your people live in peace and your will be done. Through Christ Jesus we pray, Amen