

Text: John 15: 1-8
Title: Verdant Vines
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In the late 1930s a doctor at Harvard was discouraged by all the research done with sick people that divided the body into symptoms and diseases and viewed it through the lenses of a hundred specialized microscopes but that

rarely look at the whole of the human,
rarely looked at the big picture,
rarely looked at the healthy.

So, this physician crafted a research model that would track the lives of those who could “paddle their own canoe.” He wanted to analyze the markers that produced “normal young men..... the combination of sentiments and physiological factors which in toto is commonly referred to as successful living.”

And, with that guide he gathered 268 male students from Harvard and with every available tool, from every available angle, employing every available measure from every available field of study he launched a research project that has lasted for more than 70 years. For more than 70 years these 268 men have been probed, prodded, poked, pricked, and profiled in a “longitudinal study.”

Rather than take a big slice of the pie and measure it at a particular moment, this research took a small piece of the pie and measured it over a life time.

What the “Grant Study” has yielded is a treasure trove of observations about the human experience ~ even as it is limited to men who went to Harvard in the 1940s. The stories of their lives read like Russian novels with expansive triumphs and staggering tragedies. There are remarkable tales of war, and senatorial races, and there is one U.S. President among them. There is alcoholism, depression, divorce, empires built and empires lost, struggles with sexuality, drugs, suicide, success, happiness, loneliness, loss...

In reading their lives and analyzing the data researchers have made some surprising observations. For example:

Regular exercise in college predicted late life mental health better than physical health. Their cholesterol levels at 50 had little bearing on their health at 70. Those who suffered from depression by 50 were more likely to die by 63. Those with close relationships with siblings were much healthier in old age than those without. The predictive importance of temperament diminishes over time; how we engage the world at one time does not determine how we might do so at another time. Education, obesity, cigarettes, and alcohol were important factors. Long term health was connected to more education and less obesity, cigarettes, and alcohol.

You get the idea. Of course, you can't read too much into this study because the sample was so small, but the stories of the human condition are endlessly fascinating and more vivid and more complex than any theory or lens can capture. As the current lead researcher in this project wrote:

Their lives were too human for science, too beautiful for numbers, too sad for diagnosis and too immortal for bound journals.

But, I kept coming back to the underlying question:
What are the markers of a healthy happy life?
How do we understand successful living?
What would an abundant life look like?

Dear friends, I would suggest that our text this morning offers an image that is essential to human happiness. Or, maybe better said, our text this morning proclaims a truth that is essential to living in the *shalom* that God intends for people.

Jesus says, "I am the true vine, and my father is the vinedresser...."

And, "I am the vine; you are the branches....."

In some ways Jesus was just employing a familiar image; vines were part of the flora and fauna of first century Palestine. It was a metaphor that everybody understood. Jewish listeners would have heard it as a reference to Israel because in Hebrew scripture the vine was often a symbol for Israel. For example, the Psalmist wrote that God brought a vine out of Egypt, and planted it in a good land.

And, when things went badly for Israel the vine was also used as symbol. So, the Psalmist writes that foreigners ravage God's vineyard and wild beasts uproot it. Or, in Isaiah, the vine that should have produced good grapes bore wild grapes instead. Or, the prophet Jeremiah writes:

*I planted you as a choice vine, wholly of pure seed.
How have you turned degenerate and become a wild vine?*

And so on....

It is against that backdrop that Jesus claims to be the true vine, the true Israel, through which the purposes of God in this world would be expressed.

Now, that's all well and good, but the metaphor also suggests an organic, earthy, vital, life-giving relationship to the Divine. It is not an image that is top down. This is not a holy God who is wholly other than us ~ distant and removed and demanding. This is an image that is bottom up. This is a God who is part of the very soil and sun and water and sap that we need to survive. The image of a vine suggests a human spirituality in which we are intimately connected to God. It suggests a spirituality that has

some flow,
some growth,
some change,
some fruit,
some life....

And, the source of that life is God.

John Calvin gets at that mystery this way:

Christ simply means that we are dry and worthless wood when we are separated from him, apart from him we have no ability to do good...

The *shalom* that God intends for human life involves a connection to God that is so essential and life giving that without it we dry up and wither like so many dead branches that get tossed into the summer night's campfire.

Other translations of this passage use the term "abide" to describe this relationship with God. "Abide in me as I abide in you." It is not just a matter of being connected like branches to a vine, but there is a mystical union. The language of abiding in or simply being "in" is the language of intimacy ~ it is almost sexual in tone.

Now, I am staggered by that idea of intimacy with God. Maybe you are too?

In a busy-brutal-complex-wired-crazy-distracting-fast-world the notion of me abiding in God and God abiding in me can seem far fetched, profoundly foreign, and hard to fathom. Maybe it's just a matter of peculiar personal taste. I like my God creating from a distance, not pulsating life in me. Or, I like my God at work salvaging creation to the good that God intended, not abiding in me. Or, the notion of intimacy with God knocks me back because

I know of the dry rot that is in my trunk,
and I know the disease that is in my roots,
and I know the stale fruit that is on my branches.

For some, it is hard to imagine intimacy with God. We want desperately to be alive and connected to the vine, because we feel like disconnected, dry, kindling ~ but intimacy with God is almost unbelievable.

But, what if we also read this text this way?

The researchers in the Grant Project at Harvard suggest that one marker for health and wholeness is friendship. Those men who had substantial friendships at 47 were inclined to live longer richer healthier lives than those who were alone. In fact, the notion of human relationship as a marker for health resonates throughout the whole library of study. In one researcher's words:

*It is social aptitude, not intellectual brilliance or social class that leads to successful aging.
Relationships matter more than anything else.*

Dear friends, just like there is a collective communal sense to "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me..." So, too there is a collective communal sense to "I am the vine; you are the branches..."

The image that Jesus employs is not that of a solitary tulip that emerges from a single bulb, but it is a vine, and a vine has many branches, and those many branches draw sustenance from that same life giving vine.....

We are connected to God together.
We abide together.
We flow and grow and change and bear fruit together.
We are "in" God together.

Now, in that I find great comfort. Jesus is not just talking about a "personal relationship," but he is talking about a gathered community. He is talking about a new Israel. He is talking about a church.

I'd be the first to suggest that healthy human spirituality is not limited to church. For all the rich gifts of our life together it diminishes God to think that this is all that there is....But! But, clearly this is part of it!

John Calvin wrote that,

...as long as Christ remains outside of us... all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless...; all that he possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with him.

"Until we grow into one body with him..." Or, to mix metaphors, until we are grafted into the vine.....

And, the way that we do that, the way that we are a part of the body and part of the vine, is in our life together

in baptism,
in communion,
in congregational fellowship,
in praying together,
in being pruned together,
in sitting under scripture together,
in marrying and burying together,
in being church ~ together.

Neil Plantinga puts it this way:

...the classic events by which a person attaches to Christ are corporate. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are church sacraments, intended to bind to Christ and to each other a whole body of people who don't necessarily even like each other very much. Some are originally Jews, some Greeks. Some lean left in their politics, some right. Some want traditional church music, some contemporary. Like spokes, the only place these folks fit together is at their hub. Somehow we must all fit "into" Christ.

Part of verdant vine life,
part of an abundant life,
part of a healthy human spirituality is being baptized into Christ ~ whereby we are signed and sealed as those who belong to the death and resurrection of Christ. And, in that we are part the life giving vine.
Thanks be to God.

One last thing.

Hope is a fluid church community. We flow in and we flow out. We are a busy people scattered all over greater Chicago-land, and half of us are here half of the time and the other half are here the other half of the time. We like it that way. And, as summer slowly dawns there is even more reason to be here less than half of the time. But, in the grand tradition of preachers shaking their fingers about church attendance at the very people that are present in church...

There is something about vine life that requires intention, that requires tending, that required time. There is not doubt that we will be nurtured by time in the woods and time on the water. There is no doubt that we will be refreshed by those quiet Sunday mornings when it just makes more sense to let the day slowly unfold rather than hurry off to church.

And yet, I am reminded that even in this, even in our life together, the Spirit of God is alive and active. And, in being together we are reminded, renewed, reformed, rerooted, and resurrected to abide in Christ and with one another. And, that seems like reason enough to get us to church.....

Thanks be to God.
Amen.