## John 15:1-8

”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. 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.

Years ago, Billy and I were working in our yard in Big Stone Gap when our tiny kitten, Mango, decided to climb a tree. He had no problem scurrying up but, after he enjoyed the view from about seven or eight feet off the ground, Mango couldn't figure out how to get back down. He maneuvered his way onto a small branch, looked down, then promptly slipped, holding onto the branch for dear life. I tried to reach up and grab Mango, but he was too far up for me to reach and he was too scared to jump into my arms. The poor cat hung from that branch until I went into the shed, found a ladder, brought it back, set it up under the tree and climbed up to save him. Of course, if Mango had fallen, he probably would have been OK, since he wasn't *that far* off the ground, but I don't think he knew that. From his vantage point, the ground was far away and his life was in danger. The whole scenario put me in mind of those motivational posters you see with a cat hanging onto a branch and the encouraging words “Hang in there” printed across the top.

I have had many “Mango” moments in my adult life, when I have found myself losing my grasp on whatever I am trying to hold onto and grabbing whatever I can to keep from falling. It doesn't seem to matter how far I am from the ground, hanging on feels dangerous and the longer I hang there, the more I fear losing my grip. The fear is real, because I have experienced some falls in my life and know how painful they can be.

As I read today's gospel lesson, it occurred to me that I have always understood Jesus' words as a kind of warning against those “Mango” moments in life. “Abide in me,” Jesus tells us, giving us the image of a vine and its branches to visualize what he is saying. “I am the vine, you are the branches,” Jesus says. I have always imagined Jesus is encouraging us to hang on to him when life gets tough. When we find ourselves dangling in the air, our arms tiring, we are to hold on tighter, for Jesus will be there as quickly as he can with a ladder to save us. And if we fall before he can get there? Well, it's because we aren't tough enough, or don't have enough faith, or the branch is too small to hold our weight or we let something in ourselves die and so we prune ourselves right off the vine.

That is certainly a time-honored way of understanding Jesus' words. Read the Bible, come to church, pray, live a good life and Jesus will be there for you when you need him. “Abide in me and I will abide in you.” But I don't think that is really what Jesus is saying. “Abide in me as I abide in you.” Those are Jesus' words. The way they are translated is a little awkward because it puts our action before that of Jesus. A more helpful theological way of putting it might be, “Because I abide in you, you are able to abide in me.” As the eternal true vine, Jesus is the source of all life. We are grafted onto him by the skillful, loving hands of God. The waters of baptism keep us alive in Christ. As the vine brings food to the branches, Christ feeds us at his table. Jesus is always nurturing us, always loving and saving us. He doesn't wait in stagnant judgment for us to figure out how to make our way to him. Jesus is always moving, reaching out to us, to pull us back when we stray too far. When we do fall, as inevitably we will in this life, Jesus picks up the pieces of us, breathes new life into us and pulls us close so that we may abide in him once more.

What once was dead now lives. This is resurrection. The forces of evil feared Jesus, they felt threatened by his counter-cultural words and ways, so they killed him, but that is not the end of God's story. God raised Jesus so that all that is evil, all that is dangerous, all that is frightening in this world would not kill God's precious children. The risen Christ lives to pour life into us so that we might thrive in relationship with him and abide in him forever. God's vineyard is buzzing with life, spreading love in a world that all too often seems to hunger and thirst for hate and division. So we, branches of this teeming life, grow to bear the fruits of the Spirit, so that in us, others may know new life. Our brothers and sisters in Christ in the Roman Catholic church speak of a list of the fruits of the Spirit that are called the “works of mercy.” These works are a helpful way for us to think of the fruits that Christ's love extends through us. There are seven *physical* works of mercy on this list: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, shelter the homeless, visit the sick, visit the prisoners, bury the dead and give alms to the poor. In addition, seven *spiritual* works of mercy make the list: counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish the sinner, comfort the sorrowful, forgive injuries, bear wrongs patiently and pray for the living and the dead. Working together, the body of Christ shares his love through these gifts of the Spirit.

These works of mercy are a far cry from the “Hang in there” message our culture and even our churches often throw at those hanging by their fingernails. Not a one of us can make it in this world on our own, by sheer will or whatever short or long-term strength we can conjour up. We are all here through the mercy of God. The fruits of mercy that we bear allow others to know Jesus, to thrive in his love and to bear love's fruit themselves. This is how God's vineyard grows. God's love is saving our world as branch after branch is grafted onto the vine that is the living Christ. Branches are fed and provide food for others, are pruned and grow stronger, find shelter and give it, moving outward in love and compassion until the day when all God's children flourish side by side in God's exquisite grace, bearing the sweetest and most satisfying fruit the world has ever known.

Amen.

*Easter 5B*

*April 29, 2018*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

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