

## Gethsemane Lutheran Church

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Rev. Elizabeth Durant, *Interim Pastor*



Lectionary Bible Study for Fifth Sunday of Easter

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

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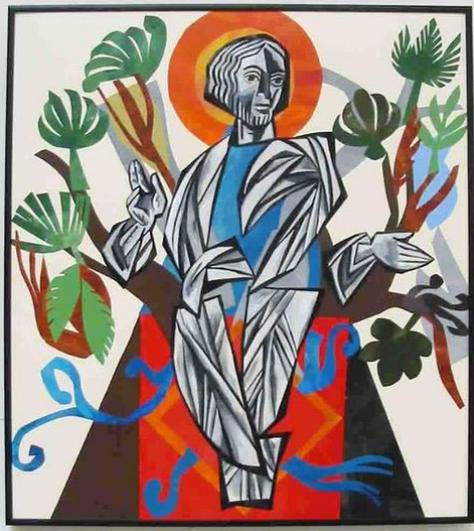
*“I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” John 15:5*

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More metaphors! In our scripture this week, Jesus is at it again, using a familiar (for the time) agricultural image to explain himself to the disciples. This time, Jesus says he is a vine...a grapevine! The disciples are the branches (technically “canes”), and God is the vine grower. Jesus describes this image to the disciples while they are sitting together during their final Passover meal.

As his followers eat bread and drink wine, Jesus uses imagery that calls to mind the words of the prophet Isaiah. In Isaiah 5:1-7, God compares the people of Israel to a rich and fertile vineyard, planted and tended with loving care, which produces “bad fruit” instead of “good grapes.” In the Gospel of John, Jesus uses this image of a vineyard – and the risk and reward it contains – to create a picture of the community that will soon be transformed by his death and resurrection.

Life for the branches/disciples/us is dependent upon remaining connected (“abiding” vs. 4) to the vine. Apart from the vine and its sustaining root and stem, the branches can do nothing. Jesus is the source of all nourishment and strength, the life-blood needed for the branches to exist and thrive



I notice that the Greek word here for **abide** (μείναι) is the same one that Jesus uses in the garden of Gethsemane when he is praying. In Matthew 26:38, Jesus says “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here (μείναι) and keep watch with me.” To **abide** in and with Christ is a serious, life-or-death, moment-by-moment decision.

While we might be distracted by evaluating the quality of our produce (are we “bad fruit” or “good grapes”), Jesus isn’t just talking about us as individuals. Jesus is also speaking of us as a faith community. How do we, as Gethsemane, find our life, our daily nourishment and strength, in the vine of Christ? What fruit are we able to bear as a community of faith?

In verse 2, Jesus says the vinedresser will prune the fruit-bearing branches so that they might be stronger and bear more fruit. This might seem harsh. Yet a branch properly pruned will be stronger to withstand the heat of the day and the storms that may come. As we reflect on the changes that have happened in our church, we might feel that sense of pruning, of being reshaped that we might one day bear more. Is that comforting, or disturbing, or both?

Pr. Nadia Bolz-Weber says “Christianity is a lousy religion for the ‘I’ll do it myself’ set. We are meant to be tangled up together. We are meant to live lives of profound interdependence, growing into, around and out of each other. We cause pain and loss when we hold ourselves apart, because the fate of each individual branch affects the vine as a whole.” What is our connection like to others in our church? Are we feeling the pain of separation because of the pandemic? How might we nurture our connections with one another?

Beloved, the good news is that as we **abide** (μείνᾱτε) – remain, stay with, wait – in Christ, we find a life that sustains and a clear purpose. Jesus says: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (v. 12). We are created in and for love, that active practice of being vulnerable, being tended, sharing nurture. No pandemic can break the connection that we have to Jesus, the vine of our life, the source of our strength.

*Holy One, help me to cling close to the vine. I want to follow your commandment to love, and sometimes it is so hard. Give me all that I need, so that I can more deeply connect to community in this challenging time. Guide us, as a church, that we might abide in you. Amen.*