

Hom 5 Easter B April 29, 2018

Last week we heard Jesus describe Himself as the Good Shepherd. I shared four points about the Good Shepherd and when I finished I noted that I had probably not said a single thing that everyone in the church did not already know. That being true I said that the point of hearing these same bible stories year after year is not primarily to give us more knowledge or information about Jesus. The point of hearing the same stories year after year is to encourage us to reach out and connect with Jesus. Our goal is to have a personal relationship with Jesus not just to know about him in our heads. Hopefully like any relationship our relationship with Jesus is constantly growing stronger and more authentic.

A good Christian is not someone who knows all the bible stories by heart and has bible passages memorized. A good Christian is someone who has connected with Jesus and shares his spirit. If the spirit of Jesus is flowing through your soul then you think different, you behave different, you feel different, you respond differently to the world about you. If the spirit of Jesus is flowing through your soul then you have this wonderful love in your heart, you have this light in your mind, you have this incredible peace in your soul. Someone who is connected to Jesus responds differently to failure, to death, to rejection to offense than someone who is not connected to Jesus. Someone who is connected to Jesus is filled with this enormous awareness of having been blessed and in turns wants to be a blessing to others.

We just read another Gospel passage this week from the Gospel of John. This week Jesus tells us that he is the vine and we are the branches on the vine. If I was to search the whole bible for a follow-up to last week's Gospel I could not have found a better passage than the one we just read. The whole point of branches on a vine is that they are CONNECTED to the vine and through the vine to one another. As long as the branches remain attached to the vine the life giving sap flows up from the roots through the main stem and out to nourish the branches. The sap inside the vine is the source of life. The sap is the Holy Spirit. Prune a branch away from the vine and the sap quickly dries out and the branch dies. Again, the connection to Jesus is central to this bible passage just like last week.

But there is more here than a personal connection to the person of Jesus. Jesus knows that in the Jewish bible used in the synagogues the vine is a metaphor for the people of God, for Israel (Ps 80:8-11; Ez. 17:1-5; Jer. 12:10-11; Isa. 5:1-7). Staying connected to Jesus then is more than just having a personal relationship with Him. Staying connected to Jesus means being part of a people, a community of believers, a church. Jesus leaves room for no misunderstanding. The vine is the New Israel, the body of Christ, the Church and you and I are branches on the vine. Being connected to the church is a vital part of being connected to Jesus Himself.

Today there is a notion that Christians do not need any parish churches to belong to because religion is viewed as primarily a private matter. More and more Americans are leaving organized religion for the me-religion. This me-alone- religion appeals to our independent spirit, but it is not consistent with the teaching of Jesus regarding our need to be connected to His Body on earth. If one is not part of a church community one is missing out on a critical part of Christian spirituality.

Jesus called people together, to be a community of believers. The only prayer Jesus taught us begins with the word "Our". "Our" Father. Not "My" Father. The Christian is part

of the new Israel, the vine, the community, the church. St. Paul tells us *“As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many are one body, so also Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body . . . and we were all given to drink of one Spirit . . . Now you are Christ’s body, and individually parts of it”* (1 Cor. 12:12-13,27). The vine is not just the person of Christ but His body on earth, the church.

Remember the passage where Jesus says: *“Without me you can do nothing.”* If we are to believe Christ then some how we need the church to experience Christ in his fullness.

Vines like all plants have problems. You just can’t use any grape that comes off the vine to make wine because some grapes are diseased, sour, bitter; some have infections which could spread and kill the entire vine. Some vines seem to attract insects which destroy the leaves and weaken the plant. Some vines have branches that produce no fruit and simply weaken the plant by draining away energy. Plants have problems.

By analogy if plants have problems then the body of Christ, the Church, has problems. The Church has branches, people within it, who simply suck away it’s life and leave the rest of the body weaker. The body of Christ has members who feed on discord, anger, resentment and bitterness.

The Church, the Body of Christ, has some branches which are truly diseased. We have pedophiles and thieves, bad shepherds, busy-bodies and gossips. Look long enough and you will find that just about everyone in the church falls short of fully and completely living the teachings of Jesus in some way or another. Like I said, plants have problems and by analogy so too does the church.

Sometimes the church is in the news and what we hear is truly horrific. Some people and events in our church’s history can leave us with a sense that the church is nothing more than a cesspool of immorality and indifference. We expect people in the church to be striving for holiness and then we find out the opposite is true. It is understandable why some people feel a need to separate themselves from organized religion.

Having said this, Jesus seems to be encouraging us to stick it out, to remain within the sheepfold, the community of the church. The branch cannot survive once it is cut off from the church community. Jesus reminds us that the weeds will remain in the field until the harvest. It will be the job of the harvest master to separate the weeds from the wheat. The diseased branches remain part of the vine until the vine grower, the Father, prunes the plant and separates the bad from the good. Jesus is up front in telling us to expect sin within the community but cautions us against taking over his role as judge. It is the vine dresser who is responsible for pruning the vine, not you and not me. Listen again to Jesus.

*“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He takes away every branch that does not bear fruit, and everyone that does he prunes so that it bears more fruit”* (John 15:1-2).

There is a temptation for people to set their minds and hearts on the negative, on the bitter grapes, the diseased branches, the virus-ridden leaves. I know someone who has now joined four different churches but left every single one because she found people in each church who did not measure up to what she thought a Christian might be. Jesus continually encourages us to be a people of the light who dwell on the positive. There are and have always been truly holy, Christ filled people within the church walking in the steps of Jesus. While some of the most corrupt popes ruled the Vatican St. Francis of Assisi was part of the same church. Why not focus on the good people instead of the bad? Saints and

sinners are always part of the church just like the weeds and wheat grow in the same field. .

Jesus said: "Without me you can do nothing." Keep a personal relationship with Jesus but also maintain your bonds to the body of Christ, the Church.

Be positive: St. Paul said:

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil 4:13).

Again, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

Please bow your heads in prayer.

Jesus, your Holy Spirit, your life force is flowing through the arteries and veins of your people gathered here. We are connected to you Jesus. You are the vine and we are your branches. Be with us Jesus. Sustain us. Fill us. Consume us. May we truly be one with you through the Spirit.

You, Jesus, are forever present within your body on earth, the church. Help us to focus on the good in the people around us. You, Jesus, are the source of that good. May we light candles rather than curse the darkness, heal the wounded, nurture the good, encourage the discouraged and witness to your way of love. Live within us, Jesus. Help us, Jesus, to truly become the vine, your body on earth.