Easter 5B. Acts 8:26-40, Ps. 22:25-31, 1 John 4:7-21, John 15:1-8

We are blessed with wonderful readings this morning. Please open up the bulletin on our website and immerse yourselves these sections of scripture this week. They will gladden your hearts with a message of inclusion, poetry praising God, a loving sermon on God’s love, and a parable about community.

Do you remember the children’s song, “His Banner over Me is Love? The first verse is “The Lord is mine and I am his; his banner over me is love.” The second is “He brings me to banquet table. His banner over me is love.” The third verse is “He is the vine and we are the branches. His banner over me is Love.” I have often used this song as the theme song for communion classes for young children, so that they understand that they belong to a community that loves and supports them. Well, my friends, that’s the theme for today’s sermon.

Here we are on the 5th Sunday after Easter and we are reading words from the gospel of John that come from Holy Week, specifically from the Last Supper. Jesus is well into his final discourse. He has given them the new commandment, “Love one another as I have loved you.” Just before today’s reading, Jesus promises that God will send the Counselor/Holy Spirit. I imagine Jesus took a deep breath and a minute of thought at this point. He wasn’t quite ready to leave them, and so continued talking with the disciples, giving them words about how to live together, words that they can hold onto once he is gone.

Today’s gospel begins, “I am the true vine, [true meaning real or authentic], and my Father is the vine grower.” Vines of all kinds are familiar to people in California. Star jasmine abounds and gives us beautiful flowers and a lovely scent. If not pruned it becomes an unruly mess, growing up trees and fences with intertwining branches. The plant benefits from pruning, which strengthens and shapes it.

We live in wine growing country and when you drive by vineyards you see that the vines are closely pruned, because the closer the branches are to the stalk, the more nutrients they receive, producing more fruit. If we as a community live close to God and soak in God’s love through Jesus, we will produce fruit, which are acts of love; we must love each other and reach out in love to those we meet. We are not only Easter people who abide in the risen Christ. We are also Pentecost people, who live in the grace of the Spirit.

 Jesus is talking with the disciples, his closest friends and most faithful followers. He reminds them that they have already been cleansed/pruned, both words have the same Greek root, reassuring them that they need not fear. It’s helpful here to remember that John’s gospel was written well after the crucifixion, so the writer is both telling the story of Jesus, and he is also speaking to his own community, whose members may be led astray by false prophets. We are the third audience, [and we also may go astray at times.]

Jesus says, “Abide in me as I abide in you.” This “abide” is a plural imperative.

These words are both a gracious invitation and a loving command given for our sakes. They are fundamental for Christian community. And they are profoundly counter-cultural to 21st century urban living. As Debie Thomas has written, “We are products of a contemporary culture that celebrates the individual and distrusts the communal.  We often represent the Christian life as a one-on-one transaction between a single believer and her God, for example: “I believe Jesus is my personal Savior.”  We put a lot of stock in our personal spiritual experiences: my prayer life, my worship, my epiphany. (From JourneywithJesus.net, 4/22/201)

 Remember that star jasmine. 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.  In this metaphor, dependence is not a matter of personal morality or preference; it’s a matter of life and death — branches that refuse to cling to the vine *die.*  We’re talking about spiritual death here. In John’s gospel Jesus said that he came that we might have abundant life, that is life that abounds with God’s love. We can choose to go our own way and follow our own interests, but that will lead to an emptiness and ultimately to sorrow.

Wow…is this what I signed up for? I doubt this specific metaphor was in your mind, at least consciously, but as we live into our baptismal vows, some promise of our life together must have touched our heart’s deepest desire-- to be known, to be loved, and to matter.

 If there is a silver lining to this pandemic, it is that we have come know in a new and profound way that we need each other. We long for the day we can be together in person, receiving the bread and sharing the common cup. We have recognized our common humanity and our rootedness in the one who gives us life and nurtures us. We have seen and heard many stories of people reaching out to each other and to strangers who need food. We have thanked front line workers for staying at their jobs so that we could continue with the least amount of disruption. We have continued to support the food bank, both at St. Paul’s and county-wide. How many times have you said to others, “We have to get together after this is over!”

 Where did we find the strength to keep on going when we were living in isolation? I believe our community, rooted in God’s in love and each other’s support, prepared us and shaped us for trying times. Even at a distance we have connected through online worship, Fr. Mauricio’s daily meditations, newsletters, telephone calls, Zoom coffee and happy hours, classes and meetings. We didn’t do it perfectly, but that hardly matters. Every time something didn’t work, we learned and kept up community. These ways of being community bear witness to the truth and wisdom of Jesus’s description of life in Christ: we are branches on a vine that is constantly nurtured by God’s love and revealed in Jesus.

 Now what about pruning? In John’s mind there are branches that do not produce fruit. They fail to live in love and are concerned only with themselves. Now there is another way that I want to look at pruning. As human beings we at times find ourselves falling short of God’s teachings and our own expectations of ourselves. This awareness opens up an inflection point. We can ignore the sorry truth and stray away from God, our neighbor or our inner self, wallow in guilt, or discount it all together. This creates separation. The better choice is we can repent, make amends and rebuild the relationship. This is a kind of redemptive pruning that brings us back into relationships that have been injured.

 John took a familiar image and reworked it to set forth a vision for his people. The community that Jesus calls forth is one that embodies an African proverb: ˆBecause we are, I am. Ubuntu.

 I want to turn to the other reading from John, our second reading, which scholars believe is from the same pen as the gospel at approximately the same time. You will recognize the same themes and language in both passages. That community was trying to live out the teaching of today’s gospel. It was a perilous time when there were other teachers who made other claims about God and Jesus.

Chapter 4 begins with a warning to not believe false prophets. At the beginning of today’s passage the author encourages the community to live in love. We love because God first loved us. First and foremost, take from today’s readings a sense of God’s profound love for each of you and for us as a community. Jesus said, “Abide in me as I abide in you.” This intimacy is a gift from God, not only to the disciples but to us also.

 There will be challenges as we begin to bring the whole community back together in person. We will be discerning what God is calling us to as we move into the future together. The one thing I am certain of is that when we are able to have worship in-person in the church, we are going to be absolutely giddy with joy!