

5-10-09 sermon – Branches of the Vine (Mother's Day) (John 15:1-8)

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This is a day for celebrating the vines of which we are the branches – gathering together with our family trees or via telephone across the miles to re-connect with our mothers or with our children or extended family. In the Springtime, it just seems natural to honor and give thanks for the moms who launched us into this world.

And sometimes we ponder what it means to be a part of these vines.

A couple weeks ago I attended the dedication ceremony for a peace pole placed at Hershey Medical Center by the on-campus Physicians for Social Responsibility group. I enjoyed talking with several international students who took part in the dedication service. We prayed fervently the prayer that is inscribed on the peace pole: *"May peace prevail on earth"* – a prayer begun in response to the suffering of Hiroshima after the bomb was dropped there, with an earnest desire to avoid future devastations of war. I was glad to share that we have a peace pole in our church yard and that my parents served as volunteers at the World Friendship Center in Hiroshima, Japan. We are shaped by the values of the vines to which we belong.

I was also intrigued to discover that the faculty advisor for this peace pole project is a Dr. Lewis, because my mother was a Lewis, and there might be some family tree connection from way back (genealogical game). Someday I'd like to find out whether Meriwether Lewis of the Lewis & Clark Expedition is my ancestor.

The biological and attitudinal DNA of our family trees is important. It helps to explain why my dark-haired parents could give birth to my very blond sister and my siblings are all quick to say, *"Sorry."* We are shaped by genes our mothers and fathers passed along to us as well as by the attitudes and lifestyle choices they modeled to us. In the same way, our children's children – even to the 3rd and 4th generations, the Bible says – will be molded in significant ways by how we live and behave, as well as by the genetic pool that blends together the chemistry of their earthly bodies.

Our scripture passage today reminds us that we are not just branches of an earthly, human family vine. When we become part of God's family, we become branches of the vine of Christ, grafted into a network of relationships with God's people that can shape and mold us in new ways. We can be saved from destructive patterns we may have inherited from parents and grandparents. We are not doomed to repeat

all the sins and errors of the past. When the sap of this new vine – the Holy Spirit of the Risen Lord – flows into and through us, we are transformed, even if gradually ... transformed into a new way of living, to grow into the likeness of Christ Jesus.

Do *you* know what that is like? to become a branch of the vine of Christ? The verses immediately after our text today describe what it means: “*remain in my love,*” Jesus says, and “*obey my commands.*” That is how we abide in him. And Jesus says, “*My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.*” That is, of course, exactly what Jesus did for us on the cross – he sacrificed his life to open the way for us to have life with God. And that is what he asks of us – that we sacrifice our desires to be able to care well for others, the way our mothers may have done for us.

It can be a painful process to love one another the way Jesus has loved us. A lot of pruning is usually needed – to reduce the energy flowing into non-essentials – cutting out of our lives all but what is necessary to produce fruit – to bring forth new generations of faithful people.

The same word translated as “*pruning*” in John 15 is translated as “*cleansed*” or “*made clean*” in verse 3. Jesus says his followers have already been made clean (pruned), when they heeded the instructions he gave – to turn away from sin and to follow him. They are now ready to produce fruit. Are *we* ready? to allow the Word of God – that double-edged sword that penetrates to divide soul and spirit, joints and marrow, to judge the thoughts and attitudes of the heart, as Hebrews 4:12 says God’s Word is supposed to do ... are we willing to let God’s Word show us what is unnecessary and unhelpful that we must leave behind in order to make room for the Life-giving love that God wants us to pursue and abide in?

The purpose of such pruning of our sinful nature is to bring forth the fruits God intends for our lives – as Galatians 5:19-23 (from the New Living Translation) says: “*When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God. But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*” These spiritual fruits launch us, and all whose lives we influence, us into the Life with God that abides beyond this world.

Celebrate, then, how God has been at work through your father and mother to give you birth in this earthly life. Rejoice in all that has been good in your inheritance from them. But also ask the Lord to help you overcome any patterns that are not helpful or even destructive to you. Allow the love of Jesus to bring forth in you a fuller inheritance – to transform your living and your attitudes, pruning away fruitless parts of your life so that you may focus on abiding in Christ’s love – to love well the people entrusted to your care, launching them along with you into a life with the Lord that shall never end.

For the transforming love of Jesus alone is able to graft us together as fruitful branches of the one true vine that endures forever. Let us stand to sing our faith.

Hymn: Blessed Assurance