

“Standing on the Promises”
A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRode
The Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 10, 2009
Scripture: 1 John 4:7-21
John 15:1-8

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: *Lord Jesus, as we gather here this morning in confidence that you abide in us, remind us that because you abide in us, we abide in you, and that nothing, not even our failings as disciples, can separate us from your love. Amen.*

I am not sure that you realize it but Mothers’ Day is probably one of the most difficult Sundays of the year for me to preach. It is difficult – not because I don’t absolutely love being a daughter, a mother and a grandmother – but because the journey to having those titles was a long and painful one.

So, my friends, to stand here on Mothers’ Day not knowing whether to celebrate with those of you who whose journey to motherhood was “normal” or to down-play the day because I can truly identify with those of you for whom this is a painful day, is not easy! You see, whether we approach Mothers’ Day as a child or as a mother, we often experience conflicting feelings. The love between a mother and child – whether you are the mother or the child – is never easy.

The thing of it is, though, that love is not supposed to be easy. Love is not supposed to be safe. Love is not supposed to be a kind of equal partnership or reciprocal relationship. And the reason is that the ones we love are not supposed to be “perfect”. It is the choice to love each other – imperfect though we are – which matures and perfects each one of us.

In our epistle reading this morning, are words I usually insist on reading at weddings – when the bride and groom are sure they want the love chapter from First Corinthians read. I do that because I think the words in First John help us hear Paul’s words differently. The writer of First John presents two things about God. First, God is love. Not “love is God,” but “God is love.” God’s presence and power are known and revealed in this world through the expression of love. And, second, that God’s love – a parent’s love – a father’s and/or a mother’s love – is

revealed to us in that God’s love for us is so great that He sent his only Son into the world that we might live through him”. This is God’s love as parental love, the God whose love for the Son is so great that it is used to save the whole world.

Brothers and sisters, knowing these two things about God is the basis for all of us as God’s children to love one another. As John tells us, “Since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another”. In fact, it is in this expression of love for our brothers and sisters that we bring God’s presence into this world and that we are “perfected” by that love. Love changes us. Love changes the world. But we can only love if we have first been loved.

In our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus used the analogy of a vine and branches to explain this loving relationship. When he spoke about vineyards in his day, people knew what he was talking about. In that time and place, growing grapes was an industry which had been carefully cultivated for centuries and it was vital to the economy of the land. When Jesus spoke about vineyards, the people of Judea knew what he was talking about, much as a person in Iowa would know about corn, or a person in Mississippi would know about cotton, or a person in New Jersey would know about asparagus. It didn’t make any difference whether or not you were in that business. It was so much a part of daily life; you would still be familiar with it.

As I understand it, grape vines are a very rugged crop in a way and in another sense it is a very delicate fruit and requires being treated with kid gloves. A young vine is not permitted to bear fruit for the first three years. It is therefore drastically pruned in December and January to preserve its energy. The particular branches which do not bear fruit are cut out to further conserve the energy of the plant. If this constant cutting back was not done, the result would be a crop which was not up to its full potential.

In Jesus’ analogy, he says that he is the vine, we are the branches and God is the farmer who cultivates the vineyard. God waters and tends the soil, so that the vine is properly nourished. He takes pride in his crop. But this means that he also prunes the vines and removes the dead wood. The grapes hang on to the branches. What Jesus is saying here is pretty

clear. The disciples should receive their strength from Jesus. He is the true vine. If they break away from him, they will be like unproductive branches and die and bear no fruit. They will then have to be pruned out.

I think as we hear this analogy, we need to ask ourselves what it means to be in God’s vineyard. And we need to ask ourselves if we are bearing fruit for the Kingdom of God. How can you tell a pear tree? By the fruit that it bears. How can you tell an apple tree? By the fruit that it bears. It is just as simple as that. The fruits of the vine are more than coming to church, or Biblical knowledge or stewardship. Now I’m not saying those things aren’t important. They are – in fact they are very important. But if you ask me, the true fruit of the vine is a loving and compassionate life. Friends, it all comes down to this – how do you treat other people?

Brett Blair in his sermon, “The True Vine”, tells the story about a woman who was a member of his little country church in Tennessee many years ago. It was interesting, he says, that even before he met her, everyone had been telling him about her. What they told him was that she was a very religious person. And it was true. Not only did she bring her Bible to church every week, she took it everywhere she went. At the Sunday evening services when laypeople were frequently asked to lead the prayer time, she would be one of the first to volunteer. And her prayers were beautiful. The subject of religion was always on her mind, to the point that she could hardly carry on a conversation without it coming up.

Now, Rev. Blair says he had absolutely no problem with any of those things. What he did have a problem with was that she was relentlessly critical of anyone whom she saw as less than she. Whether it was the poor, the addicted, the divorced, the unemployed, she was without mercy and compassion. There was judgment and nothing else. Somehow, even with all the outward signs of her being a religious person, she was not bearing fruit. Do you remember that old song, “They will know we are Christians by our love”? It’s true. If you are in Christ, people will be able to see the fruits of your life in terms of your compassion and love and attitude.

The second thing we can glean from this

analogy is that there is such a thing as an unproductive life. In Jesus' analogy, the farmer (God) is depicted as pruning out bad branches. We don't like to wrestle with concept, do we? There is an element of judgment in it which we would rather not think about. But we miss the point if we ignore the lesson here. Dead branches are not only non-productive, they pull the energy away from the vine and keep it from bearing new branches. We like to think that there are various degrees of allegiance, but the truth of the matter is that in God's vineyard there are really only two kinds of branches – those that bring forth fruit, and those that do not. The former are cultivated; the latter are pruned.

And then, we must cultivate a meaningful relationship with Jesus Christ. When Jesus said, "You must abide in me", he was talking about a relationship. As the fruit receives its nourishment from the vine, so, too, we receive our daily nourishment from Christ. How tragic it is that so many today see their strength as financial security, or peer respect, or a big house or a fancy car. These things may feed us for a day or even for a season, but there comes a time when they will not bring the deep nourishment that we seek. For that we need God.

Manse Anderson, perhaps the greatest soprano who ever lived had a wonderful relationship with her mother. It was said of Mrs. Anderson's life: her music could bring one to tears; her life could bring one to their knees. She was once being interviewed and she was asked to tell them what the most wonderful moment was in her impressive career. She could have mentioned the time when the great Arturo Toscanini told her that hers was the greatest voice of the century. She could have mentioned that time when she sang before the Roosevelt's and the King and Queen of England. She could have said it was winning a coveted award as the person who had done the most for her hometown of Philadelphia. There was also the time when she sang before a crowd of 75,000 on Easter Sunday beneath the Lincoln statue. Can you guess which one she chose?

None of them – what she claimed as her greatest moment was when she went home to her mother and said, "Mom, you will never have to take in washing again." If this relationship can exist between

a mother and a child, then how much more can be our relationship with Jesus Christ?

It occurred to me as I was working on my sermon for today that, our Gospel lesson begins as if the preceding chapter had not occurred. And yet, in that preceding chapter, Jesus has promised his disciples, in words I love to read at memorial services, "I go to prepare a place for you, and I will come and take you to myself, so that where I am, you may be also." It is a promise that he and the Father will create a dwelling place and that the disciples will live with the Father and the Son forever.

It is right and good that we should read that passage at memorial services. It is in that passage that Jesus speaks of abiding, of dwelling with us not only now but always. Jesus promised that one day we shall permanently abide in him. The same closeness that we have experienced with him in this life, the same "abiding," shall continue in the life to come.

Jesus' love for us is not only in this world, it is eternal. He has pledged that if we love him and love one another, his love for us shall not end. "I am the true vine," he said. "As the Father has loved me, so I love you." By his grace we shall abide. Jesus says that when we abide in him, he will abide in us and our joy will be made full. This is the great promise of eternal life. The abiding, the joy which begins now, shall one day be forever. And nothing, and nobody, not even death "will take our joy from us". These are promises, my friends, on which we can stand.

May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

Thanks to Brett Blair for his sermon, "I Am the True Vine", William Willimon for his sermon, "Abiding in Jesus", and Leonard Sweet for his sermon, "I Love My Mother, But..."

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