

Easter 5B 2021 John 15:1-8 (Acts 8)

I do not have green thumbs. I could not tell you whether the plants growing outside of my house are intentional flowers or accidental weeds; I only know that they grow entirely aside from any skill or effort on my part. Several years ago a friend sent me a nice planter—of something that you presumably had to water more or less than I did, and I killed it. Then she sent a planter of succulents, and I killed them. She finally sent me an air plant. I killed that. And the air plant I bought as a replacement. The many biblical metaphors about sewing and harvesting, mustard seeds and cedar trees, vines and branches and bearing fruit do not resonate with me as meaningfully as some other images in scripture do. Fortunately Jesus leaves very little to interpretation when he compares himself to a vine.

Today's gospel is part of what we call Jesus' farewell discourse: several chapters immediately before Jesus' arrest when he prepares the disciples for life after his death, really life after his death, resurrection, and ascension. He promises them peace and hope by describing the relationship they can continue to experience with him even after he will have physically left them. Jesus assures them that they can continue to abide in him, to live in relationship with him, because his words and his Spirit will still enliven and empower them.

Even for those of us who couldn't grow mold if we tried, the metaphor of Jesus as the vine is a beautifully clear and simple description of the relationship in which we find ourselves, both with Jesus and with each other. Jesus is the vine and we are the branches; the Father is the vinegrower. There's not too much ambiguity here: we could extend the metaphor so that we think of the branches not just as ourselves as individuals, but also as congregations of the synod or ELCA, or as denominations of the universal Church. Either way, what holds all of us branches together is the vine of Jesus Christ, and it is only through that connection to the vine that we can bear fruit.

Simple, right? Except that we often fail to act out this straightforward understanding of our relationship to Christ and to each other. Christ is the vine to which we are all attached, which should mean that our primary connection to one another comes through our common calling as children of God, branches on the vine. Yet how often do we prioritize finding common ground through other aspects of our identity? We see ourselves as a community based on geography; or we self-select by our piety or theology; we find our communal identity in our citizenship or our nationality—whatever our [ancestry.com](#) profile says; or we gravitate toward fellow members of our chosen political party or any number of groups in which we take part. There's nothing wrong with connecting to different communities—in fact, those connections enrich our lives and, we would hope, give us the opportunity to be of loving service to others. The problem is when we define the church, the people of God, the body of Christ, by something other than connection to Jesus, the vine. The church should be full of diversity with Jesus the common bond. We're not here this

morning because we all share the same opinions, or belong to the same socioeconomic class, or vote for the same candidates, or root for the same sports teams; we're here because of Jesus.

That Jesus is to be our common denominator is illustrated for us in this morning's reading from Acts: the Ethiopian eunuch whom Philip meets on the wilderness road asks *What is to prevent me from being baptized?* We usually take that as a rhetorical question, but Philip could have easily answered that his ethnicity, his nationality, his sexuality, or his novice understanding of the scriptures prevented him from being baptized. Instead, Philip jumps into the water and baptizes him, demonstrating that none of those things should exclude him from the body of Christ. Philip sees himself rightly as a branch—not the vinegrower—so it's not up to him to decide that another branch can't be grafted into Jesus, the vine.

Unlike Philip, we sometimes forget our job as branches, which is to bear fruit. Jesus doesn't define what he means by fruit, though Paul tells the Galatians that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—all of those, by the way, not the ones we pick and choose. If we're busy cultivating love, peace, patience, kindness and all the rest we wouldn't have time left to judge the fruit on other branches, yet we do. It's human nature that we mistake ourselves for the vinegrower instead of the branches. We read about the branches that wither and are thrown into the fire, and we're tempted to look around and decide who Jesus must mean when he talks about *those* branches. That is, unless we despair because we've hit a dry spell, and, comparing ourselves to our neighbor's branches that are weighed down with fruit, we start to wonder whether we're even still alive.

The good news is that even if you have herbicidal tendencies like I do, we don't have to rely on our own ability, strength, or willpower to bear fruit. Jesus says plainly: the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine. We have the power of God's Spirit flowing through us, not because *we* will it to be so, but because Jesus abides in us. God works through us to produce good fruit for this world that God so loves. Even during those times when our lives look bleak and bare, we may discover that we have been pruned so we can bear more fruit. And lest we fear being prematurely removed and thrown away, we remember that the Vinegrower is faithful to us even when we are unfaithful, and is full of mercy, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast lovingkindness.

In just the last few days two different kinds of shrubs in front of my house bloomed into bright purple and fiery pink flowers. I assure you, I was as surprised as anyone; it certainly wasn't because of my gardening skills. If, in spite of my ineptitude, God can do something that amazing to a flower, imagine what the Vinegrower can do with our branches through the Spirit of Christ, our Lord and our Vine.