

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

Easter 5 – I AM the Vine  
Acts 8.26-40, John 15.1-8

2 May 2021  
Salem, Bridgeport

“Connected to Jesus”

Jesus said, “I am the vine; you are the branches”.

You and I live in a physical, material world.

We are physical, material beings – but we are not *only* physical beings.

In fact, we are not *primarily* physical beings.

You and I are first and foremost spiritual beings.

Without the spirit, without the life energy flowing through us,  
we would not only be dead, but we wouldn’t even exist.

I remember being taught in school that things were either animal, vegetable or mineral  
and that things in the animal and vegetable realm were living  
and things in the mineral realm were not living.

But of course that’s not really the case.

Everything physical has a life cycle.

Even stars are born and live and die.

Within our planet earth, underneath the solid crust and mantle, liquid magma teams with  
movement & life. Within the atoms that comprise every physical object, electrons dance with  
life.

It might be said that some things are more alive than others,  
moving up the life scale from mineral to vegetable to animal,  
from amoebas to reptiles to mammals,  
from human beings that seem to be barely alive  
to those whose vibrant life energy can be felt in the air around them.

Jesus came that we might have life and have it abundantly.  
He wasn’t talking about some kind of future, unending life;  
he wasn’t talking about life in some other realm;  
he wasn’t talking about heaven.  
He was talking about life here on earth.

So when Jesus says that he is the Vine and we are the branches  
he’s talking about something not simply metaphorical, but very real,  
and he’s talking about something that is rooted in the spiritual world, not the physical,  
material one.

Spiritual things can, of course, manifest in physical, material ways,  
but the difference is in where things originate, in their source, their root.

When Jesus said that he is the Vine and we are the branches,  
he was very clear that it had nothing to do with religion.

That's where the scribes and the Pharisees had gotten it wrong.

It wasn't about institutional Judaism.

It wasn't about observing annual festivals, or going to weekly worship, or following a set of rules.

It was about being connected to God.

And that's where we human beings always seem to get it wrong.

That's where we Christians get it wrong.

When Jesus is talking about the Vine and the branches it's not about religion.

It's not about the institutional church.

It's not about what we think, or what we say, or what we do,

because all of those things are human constructions.

It's not about having the right theology or belief system.

It's not about interpreting scripture or praying in a certain way.

It's not about our liturgy or hymnody or style of worship.

It's not about how many hungry people we feed or how many homeless people we house.

It's not about how much time and energy we spend working for justice and peace.

Let me be clear: I'm not saying that any of those things are bad,

but what I am saying is that no matter how beautiful our worship,

no matter how enlightening our Bible studies,

no matter how successful our marketing,

no matter how impactful our social service and advocacy programs,

no matter how generous our stewardship,

NONE of those things – indeed, even ALL of those things together –

are not enough, unless we are connected to Jesus.

When Jesus says that he is the Vine and we are the branches,

he is making it clear that only one thing is needed:

we need to be connected through the Spirit to Jesus, who is connected to God,

who is the beginning and the end and purpose and meaning of life.

Picture, if you will, 2 vines:

a real vine, created by God, and an artificial vine, created by humans.

The artificial vine is the institutional church

that has its beliefs and doctrines, its customs and traditions,

its rites and rituals, its forms and structures,

and to which we attach our physical selves.

The real vine, is the mystical church which is the true body of Christ,

to which we attach our spiritual selves,

and through which we are connected spiritually to God and to one another.

The challenge arises because we are both physical and spiritual beings.

While we find our life and purpose in that spiritual Vine,  
we are called to live out our lives in this physical world.

And so we begin to construct ways to do that that begin to take on the shape of a vine.

As long as we stay connected to the Vine, what we build is a part of the Vine,  
and Jesus infuses life into us

and the church will be filled with life and will grow and bear fruit.

But as soon as our connection is broken,

then what we build is simply an artificial replica of a vine,  
without life, without growth, and without fruit.

So how do we know if we, as individuals –

and by extension as a congregation, and as part of the wider church – are connected to Jesus?

Ask yourself 3 questions:

### **1. Am I filled with life?**

Can you feel the life energy of the Spirit flowing through you?

Are you aware of your connection to God?

Are you seeing God at work in your daily life?

Are you noticing the coincidences, the blessings, the gifts God is providing?

Are you hearing God's voice?

Is God speaking to you directly in your mind or through dreams and visions,  
or through the Bible or other readings, or through the words of another person?

Are you experiencing God's presence?

Do you feel a warmth or tingling or a chill that is the supercharge of the Holy Spirit,  
or have you experienced signs or wonders or miraculous events?

If you are seeing or hearing or experiencing God in your daily life, then you are connected to Jesus.

### **2. Am I growing?**

Do you find yourself talking with God more?

Asking God's advice more often?

Taking and heeding that advice and doing what God asks of you?

Do you find yourself trusting God more

so that you can let go of your own desires, your own logic, your own need for control,  
and step out in faith to where God calls?

Do you find yourself talking more with others about what God is doing in your life?

If your time talking with God is growing,

if your actions are becoming more faith filled,

and if you are talking more about what God's doing in your life,

then you are connected to Jesus.

### **3. Am I bearing the fruit of the Spirit?**

Look at the list of the fruits of the Spirit –

love & joy, peace & patience, kindness & goodness, gentleness & faithfulness & self-control –

and realize that for the Christian these words mean much more than their ordinary English definitions.

It's not just peace, for example, but the peace that passes understanding.

It's not just the joy that springs from blessings,

but the joy that remains when everything else has been taken away from you.

It's not just the love experienced in reciprocal relationships,

but love for those who hate you, for those who betray, deny and abandon you,

for those who look & think & act differently than you, for those who cause you to be afraid.

If you are bearing these fruits of the spirit –

like love of those who don't love you,

joy in the face of overwhelming loss,

and peace in the midst of overwhelming stress and strain, then you are connected to

Jesus.

Jesus came that we might have life and have it abundantly.

Abundant life is not the same thing as having family and friends,

and a home and a car, and enough food and money, and a comfortable life.

Abundant life is something that goes far deeper than that,

something that can survive the loss of all those things.

We do not find that life by being connected to the church;

we find it by being connected to Jesus.

As human beings in bondage to sin,

we all spend more time focused on our physical lives than on our spiritual ones,

but today Jesus invites us to reconnect.

No matter how little or how much spiritual life energy we feel coursing through us,

no matter how little or how much we've grown

in our relationship with God, in our faith, and in our witness,

no matter how barren or how fruitful we are,

Jesus invites us into an ever deeper relationship,

through which we will find more abundant life than we have yet even imagined.

Jesus invites you into that deeper relationship.

And I promise you that if you open yourself to that deeper relationship, it *will* happen,

for Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Hallelujah! Amen!