

Easter V Year B 2024

The metaphor makers are in full swing in John's Gospel. We are just beyond the middle of the fifty days of Easter, which is the principal time of year in which John makes an appearance in the lectionary. John, as you know, is radically different from the Synoptic writers, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The Synoptic writers are trying to make sense of Jesus's life and ministry in the context of Israel's biblical history. That is why each of them take great pains to connect Jesus to the tradition, likening him to Moses and Elijah, for example. They consistently make references to Hebrew scripture in order to interpret what is going on with Jesus and the movement congruent with the tradition. Their lens is on the ground in Palestine, as it were. Their agendas at their heart are reinterpretations of Torah. For them the Jesus movement represents a revitalized interpretation of Judaism up and against the calamity of Roman occupation. How shall we move forward, given the present circumstances? What does salvation look like in a brave new world?

The writer or writers of John's Gospel are using a decidedly different lens. Their agenda is to find the universal meaning of Jesus... beyond his Semitic context. Their view is not on the ground, but from the stratosphere. These writers are philosophers of the Greek academy seeking a metaphysical interpretation of Jesus; his cosmic significance. Their sources include Plato and Egyptian mysticism penned centuries before Christianity. The Synoptic writers are more interested in

what Jesus does. These writers, whom we call John, are more interested in who Jesus is. For Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus is the messiah, the anointed one, which is a political term that describes the anointed of God, the liberator of Israel; a figure who recurs throughout biblical history. John calls Jesus the Word, the *Logos*... quite another matter... The *Logos* in Greek thought is the unifying principal of existence, the 'reasonableness' of the universe, the inflexion point between heaven and earth, between human and divine. The proverbial glue that holds the universe together. Jesus, for John, is what Paul Tillich would call the "ground of our being." John's Gospel is a manifesto as to the nature of God in relationship with humankind and the world.

What makes this Gospel unique, is that, though concerned with theological premise, it isn't written as an academic theological apology. It is written more along the lines of poetry relying on metaphor. The writer knows that when concerned with mystery, then one must engage the imagination. That is why this Gospel is shot through with metaphorical representations of Jesus. "I am the good shepherd; I am the gate; I am food come down from heaven; I am living water; I am light" ... and here in our passage today: "I am the true vine."

So the metaphor is a garden. Many of you know that Katharine and I are gardeners... Well, Katharine is the gardener. I'm a mere gardener's helper. Everywhere we've ever lived we've had a garden, and our gardens have taught

and teach us much. We have learned that our plans never, ever, turn out like we'd expected. To tend a garden is to embrace improvisation. A garden is process. A garden demands persistence and resilience and patience and knowledge. It is never completed. It brings disappointment, and it brings unexpected joy. Sometimes, quite unexpectedly, its beauty shows up on the periphery, just beyond plain view. A garden has a life of its own, its own soul, as it were; and we as gardeners, and gardener's helpers, are contingent to that soul. The garden depends on us; and we depend on the garden. There is nothing we wouldn't do for its well-being. To live in a garden is to live a life of sacrifice. To tend a garden is to live in hope for the greater thing.... Among life's complexities, it is beauty that we crave.

Ironically, John's theological premise flies in the face of the church's tradition. We have been taught that God is wholly other, set apart, aloof in the heavens. According to orthodox doctrine, we travail here on earth, left to our depraved devices, with a faded hope that perhaps there will be a time in which we may know God our creator. "I am the vine and you are the branches," Jesus tells his disciples. For John, God, incarnate in the Son, is not aloof in the heavens, but intimately connected to our lives as a vine is to its branches. Both depend on the other. Our relationship to God is a symbiotic one. God nurtures us, and, dare I say, we nurture God. We depend on God, and God depends on us. As branches, we are of the same substance as the vine. We share, quite literally, God's very

DNA. God's love flows into us, and our love flows into the world. It is hard work, this garden life. It is uncertain and risky. It is riddled with disappointment. The weeds are ever opposing our best efforts, but it is this life for which we were made. We serve the soul of the garden, which is the very soul of God. We are not apart from it. In God's garden we are soul-mates. Soul-mates in the process of love. The beauty is in the process. And beauty is God's habitation. Don't look to heaven for the idea of God; God is beneath our feet in the stuff of earth.

Such a theology flies in the face of Augustine's notion that humankind is fallen from grace. The awareness in John is quite the opposite. We are made in God's image, that is to say, we are made with the capacity to love. We are organically connected to the grand master of the universe, bearing God's conscience and consciousness.... In our waking and sleeping, in our labor and play, in our lives and in our deaths. There is nothing between us. John is not asking us to be something different from what we are; he is simply calling us into our true selves. At our deaths, when we rest from our labors... it is the bearing of God's life from which we rest. Jesus speaks of the vines being pruned in order to bear fruit. He is speaking of the pruning of our distractions and illusions, both personal and cultural; the stripping away of all that is false, to unlearn the ways of hierarchy and power, so that we may recognize at last that we are only here to love, to empty ourselves for the good of the whole, to sacrifice all that we are for the well-being and beauty of the garden.

The garden with its vines and branches is God's very life... not a kingdom, but a community in which all lives are contingent, each to each... and in God's life there is abundance for all God's beloved; and there is shalom, the peace that baffles our understanding. This is no future garden, nor is there a lost Eden that we must retrieve; only the garden in which we live here and now, beautiful in its imperfection; and it needs tending, and loving care, and utter commitment. It has weeds and squash borers and blight, just as the world has violence and shame and racism, and voter suppression, and lack of healthcare... and injustice.... But still it is a marvel. Despite its ambiguity its beauty is undeniable and worthy of praise. Perhaps what we lack the most in our culture is gratitude; gratitude that we should be so privileged to live amidst such beauty.

Legend has it that St. Francis of Assisi was asked what he would do if he knew that the world was about to end... and his answer was that he would keep hoeing his garden... "I am the vine, you are the branches." Together with our God, in the way of Jesus, we are to bear the fruits of salvation: Compassion, kindness, welcome, advocacy, justice. These are the fruits of God's very soul, God's soul that is emptied out for the sake of the world God loves. Ours is to persist in that love. Persist like gardeners, and gardeners helpers. Perhaps this is all mere metaphor... and perhaps it is the truth.