

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

John 10:11-18

Acts 4:5-12

Psalm 23

1 John 3:16-24

April 29, 2018

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

I have one word for you this morning...KUDZU. If you are from the south, know someone from the south, or have simply driven through the south...you have some familiarity with this vine and probably some strong reactions as well. Kudzu is that invasive, unsightly, and unruly vine that was introduced to the United States in order to help control soil erosion. However, it turned into something much less useful...something biologists call "interference competition" which simply means it kills off everything around it by covering native plants with its leaves.

The result - it overshadows them and simply outcompetes them for vital resources. You might say, kudzu's main concern is well, kudzu. It is not a community minded plant nor does it care if you like it. If given a chance it will take over your front yard, your beloved azaleas and the family pet as well if you aren't looking.

If you have ever fought kudzu you know that constant pruning is not an option, it's a way of life. And so you get very good at cutting and mowing and pulling it out of trees. Some days it feels like you are getting nowhere. Yet, each week, you have to show up, put on your gardening gloves, and get to work. Like it or not. You find yourself in relationship with this crazy vine out of necessity but you also know that without your pruning, nothing else would have a chance to thrive. Because in all gardens – one thing is for certain, you have to plant and grow carefully in order for each thing to get enough sun, enough water, enough good soil to produce fruit. You have to pull weeds along the way, take off dead flowers, remove any rotten vegetables. Because it is never about just one plant in the garden. It's about each one, growing strong and producing an abundant harvest.

So I love that today, on our church spring cleanup day when we will be mulching, weeding, planting, and yes, even pruning that we are reminded that this is indeed a way of life – a community way of life that is essential to our wellbeing.

This essential way of being is beautifully represented in our Gospel reading from John where Christ is in the midst of his farewell discourse. He is telling his disciples good bye but also leaving them with important directives on how they are to live once he is gone. And, there are two themes in our Gospel that are worth our consideration this morning.

First, Jesus wants them to remember their wellbeing is based upon the community that they will cultivate with one another. Second, Jesus wants them to know that the health of that community will be the result of their constant care for one another. Cultivate and Care. Jesus isn't talking about each man for himself. Or, in light of pesky vine analogy - he isn't telling them to let the kudzu run wild and outcompete everything else.

Instead, Jesus is telling them to pay attention to each other. Be aware of what supports one another and take out the things that are stumbling blocks. Prune out the counterproductive, harmful things that keep us apart from one another and away from God. What better metaphor than a well-pruned and healthy vine to help them understand.

Biblical scholar, Gale O'Day suggests, *"In a vine, branches are almost completely indistinguishable from one another; it is impossible to determine where one branch stops and another branch starts. All run together as they grow out of the central vine."*¹

In other words, as a community we are uniquely intertwined, without need to rise above another, without need to claim greater status or greater privilege. There is a common dependency in Jesus' vine image and to keep it growing, he states, you have to care for each branch of that vine.

That's what he means when he says to abide in him and to let his words abide in you. Abide is a rich word that means to be held, to be kept continually, to remain as one, to not depart. A healthy vine has no choice, right? You are inter-connected and dependent on the same source of love, the same source of strength, the same source of hope. Abide there, Jesus says.

But, in our world today, dependence, or should we say "deep abiding" is not a quality we tend to want to cultivate. We want to be seen and feel like we are self-sufficient, independent, capable. In fact, not just capable on our own merits but an over-achiever on our own merits. And so, we tell ourselves that we don't need anyone else, that we will make it on our own. We shut others out, push some down, ignore a few. We say – I will deal with my own issues.

Maybe you have found yourself saying at one time or another...I will take care of my own life. I don't need anyone and I sure don't need God. I will take care of my own sadness, my own grief. I will suppress my own anger. I will deny my own fear. Because I am not going to ask for help. I am not going to say I am struggling. I am not going to admit my weaknesses. And, indeed, we may make it on our own but when we go down that path...when we are like kudzu...there is no one left – but ourselves.

We find ourselves alone with the struggles we tried so hard to put aside. But, guess what? They will still be there and in our attempts to do it all on our own, we may have shut out the people who could have supported us. We may have even closed ourselves off to the faith that could have sustained us.

And that's not what Jesus wants. Jesus wants that tangled up, messy vine – where each branch is dependent on the other. Where we turn to God and to one another for support.

1. Gail R. O'Day, "The Gospel of John," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, 491-865.

Here's something else worth noting...This is the last I Am statement that Jesus makes. The last time he tries to explain who he is and who we should be. The final lesson out of seven I Am statements.

At this point in the Gospel, he has already told his disciples:

I am the bread of life.

I am the light of the world.

I am the door of the sheep.

I am the good shepherd.

I am the resurrection and the life.

I am the way, the truth, and the life.

And, finally in John chapter 10, I am the true vine.

He has tried to explain his love and his mercy so many ways. He has tried to show people how to live as followers of his teaching. He has used words and images that we can understand so that we might take these teachings, believe them and apply them. But this is the final lesson. And we should take note.

Why the vine? Why this lesson?

Because when we find ourselves pulling away, when we think we have to do it all on our – Jesus wants us to remember that we are supported by something so much stronger. And he wants us to allow him to cultivate and care for our lives. That's the Good News that the true vine gives to us...an unwavering source of well-being and strength. An example of how we should live with Christ and how we should live with one another.

So today, as we weed and mulch and prune...I want you to consider how you might allow God to come into your life and nourish and sustain you. And, then look around, and notice where you can be that same source of care for one another. This is your community. Let us cultivate and care for God's good creation. Amen.