

Fifth Sunday of Easter, Gospel, Year B

RECONNECTED

John 15:1-8

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Analysis by Nathan Hall

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. 2 He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. 3 You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 4 Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. 5 I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. 6 Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

DIAGNOSIS: Vines Forgetting that They Are Vines, Develop a Misbegotten Sense of Agency, and Produce Abominably

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Fruitlessness (or Perhaps Even Sour Grapes)

Different vines make different fruits. Some vines are fruitless. But Jesus has just been telling the disciples (and by extension he is telling us who have not seen and yet have come to believe) what sorts of fruits to expect from the God-vine: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will

know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35). So we know the fruit we should produce, love that expresses itself in humble foot-washing service. But rarely do we produce this. At best, we know that we should make good fruit, and so off we go to volunteer in the homeless shelter, the hospital, the church, etc. Such work gives us a momentary feeling of fruitfulness. But as the demands mount, burnout kicks in, resentment simmers, and we are unwilling to exist as a vine-branch. The vine-branch cannot be self-interested. Normally our excessive self-interest is kept in check by government, where individuals, motivated by mutually assured destruction, band together in an attempt to keep some of the worst impulses in check. At worst self-interest runs unchecked by any law and humanity exploits, bombs, enslaves, destroys, etc. Perhaps noble individuals may internalize a manageable code of ethics so that they may lead just lives, yet even this is not the self-renunciation which absolute love demands.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Rambling Vines

Have you ever seen a vine-branch disconnect itself from the vine and wander off to force its own imagination on the world? Such is the image we are given. Vine-branches that do not abide in the vine. Jesus has just finished recounting a parallel image. It is the most astonishing thing: "I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you" (John 14:20). The language Jesus uses is dwelling. God is at home in Jesus and Jesus is at home in you (imagine Russian nesting dolls). This presence of God is what is meant when Jesus speaks of vines abiding. When God is at home in you, fruitful things happen. Yet these vines have wandered off. We have kicked God out of the house. It is easier to reject God than to live in love.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Bonfire

When the outer ring of a branch is cut, the xylem and phloem

cease to carry nutrients to the branch, and the branch dies. Similarly, when we disconnect ourselves from the source of life we also die. The vine will drop the branch and begin healing itself where the scar was made. In such a way, God promise to relinquish us, as crazy death-bent branches who refuse the life the vine offers. Seeing what we are and what we have become God cuts us off, leaving us to our own futile attempts at self-nourishment.

PROGNOSIS: Vines Are Reconnected and Rejuvenated, and They Produce Good Fruit

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Re-grafting

Any gardener would know that when the branch leaves the vine, only extraordinary intervention has any hope of saving that branch (grafting, rooting, etc.) God has promised us just such intervention. We are doomed, yet God in great love has chosen to give life to these dead and dying vines: Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:14-18). God has given dead vines a way to live, by being reconnected to the vine, not based on what we do, but based on trusting what God has done in Jesus.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Go a Rambling No More (Day after Day) As branches are reconnected, the life-giving sustenance of the vine is given. And God, unlike any normal affronted landowner, sets up a home for us again. God takes another (and another, and another) crack at claiming our wandering affections, and our hearts are turned to love God and each other the way God intended. (This seems analogous to what Luther refers to as the daily remembrance of baptism: repentance as a daily recurring exercise that brings eternal righteousness

and purity (right-hearted connectedness).)

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Fruit

As we branches are reconnected to the source of life, we tend to produce the source's fruit: self-sacrificing, loving service. Such is a costly discipleship, but it is a discipleship that comes from being claimed by a costly gift. This fruit is not a work (notice that in both John and Paul, fruits are gifts of God (in Paul works that come from labor but fruits are charisms)). Instead this fruit is a natural consequence of a vine-branch that abides. It is not the self-conscious effort of the vine-branch to bear fruit. It is the vine-branch behaving in the natural, none-wandering way. All the glory of the fruit belongs to the vine, not the branches. We may get glimpses of such fruit, but now we see it dimly, tangled in all sorts of dead branches. A time is coming when we will see it clearly, when the garden will be completely restored. Perhaps a good visual is to see that each of us branches form new branches in turn. Some of our branches go wandering and are to be cut off. Other bits of us, the work of faith, will endure forever, bearing fruit.