

Easter 5B
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Before I begin, I need to preface my remarks by saying that I don't like raisins. In fact, I think of oatmeal raisin cookies as a kind of mean-spirited bait and switch. They look like chocolate chip cookies but then turn out to be something that more like a healthy breakfast than a decadent dessert. Which is actually how I learned to dislike raisins. My earnest parents always packed those tiny boxes of Sun Maid raisins in my school lunch. So while other kids had the high-trading-value foods like sandwiches on white bread and those adorable little snickers bars, I had tuna on whole wheat and raisins which I couldn't pay anyone to take off my hands.

All of this dates me of course, but I'm guessing that I'm not alone in having school lunch angst. Those childhood memories run deep, no? This week I have been listening to Jesus tell us that we are like fruit-bearing branches of the grapevine that he is, and all I can think about is that—at the end of the harvest—we'll have way too many raisins and not enough chocolate chips. Such is the kingdom of God.

I'm not kidding about that. Whatever the kingdom may be, it will surely be different from what I want or expect.

Of course Jesus didn't actually mention raisins in John's Gospel. I'm pretty sure he was thinking about grapes and wine, which have deep symbolic resonance in our tradition. Throughout the Bible, the vineyard appears as a metaphor for God's people; capable as we are of both fruitfulness and faithlessness. There are some wild vines out there, as Isaiah once pointed out, and they have the capacity to choke off the good ones. But God longs to tend the vines, the Bible assures us, because God wants people to bear the fruit of wisdom and justice.

Jesus would have expected his hearers to know all that. But in this case, he was using the vineyard metaphor to describe not just the outcomes, but also the connective structure of faithful lives.

We don't get the grapes of righteousness without healthy branches. Which need to be connected to a good vine. Which requires thoughtful pruning. And good soil and plenty of water and sun at the right times of year. The grapevine depends on a long chain of interrelated ecological, anthropological and agricultural conditions. Break the connection anywhere, and the branches don't bear fruit.

So to live well with God—to bear and to be the fruit of wisdom and justice—we have to stay connected to our source. Which for John was Jesus Christ, who loved us first that we might love as he did. And this message is utterly congruent with the other lessons we heard today. The first letter of John calls us to abide in the love of God in order that we can share the love with sisters and brothers. Love has to flow—like the sap through the vine—or the community can neither flourish nor bear fruit.

And then there's that weird and wonderful first lesson from Acts. An angel sends Philip out on a wilderness journey, where he encounters a traveling African bureaucrat. The Ethiopian is both a foreigner and a sexual minority, which made him like something of a wild vine in the Hebrew tradition. That's because the Law excluded men with damaged genitals from full participation in temple worship.

But the genuine curiosity of the Ethiopian eunuch started the flow, so to speak, of Philip's interpretation of scripture. And it was the outsider who recognized that our connectedness to God in Christ—not unlike a healthy grapevine—needs irrigation. "Look, here is water!" he said with a kind of graced enthusiasm. "What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

I don't know much about vineyards beyond their richly symbolic meaning in our tradition. Well... that, and the fact that they sometimes surround lovely tasting rooms in the Willamette Valley. But I actually do know a thing or two about water. I grew up in the heavily exploited Colorado river watershed, and I studied urban water and sanitation in graduate school. One thing I learned along the way is that very few urban dwellers know where our tap water comes from, or what is the long chain of hydrological and human conditions that keep water flowing to our sinks and showers.

And it's worth pointing out that for most of human history—and indeed in most of the world even now—water doesn't just show up at the domestic tap. Most human beings still travel long distances to carry water home in buckets or cans. Water sources are hard to reach and easy to damage. That's why our Trinity volunteers who visit Nicaragua work so hard to build latrines and protect watersheds.

If you've ever been responsible for getting your own drinking water, you know it matters what source you're connected to. It has to be clean and reliable, and you have to take care of it. So if the vine metaphor doesn't convince you, you might think of yourself as the watering can and Jesus as the well. Or perhaps there's some other image of deep connectivity that describes your relationship with God. I invite you to think imaginatively—as Jesus himself obviously did—about what keeps you close. Whatever it be, know your source. Care for your connection. It's a matter of life and death.

While I may not know exactly what that life-giving relationship with the holy is like for you, I do know what it's not like. It's not like a raisin, drying up for lack of connection to the vine. It's not like a bathroom faucet, where we retreat to get our private supply. It's much more like a vineyard. Growing from the one field we share: this fragile earth, our island home. It's much more like a village well, cared for and shared in community.

Last weekend a bunch of ministry leaders gathered in Kempton Hall to think about what connects us most deeply at Trinity. Using the metaphor of pathways, Dean Nathan invited us to think about whether we are drawn towards the practice of Uncommon Warmth—what the ancient Church called *koinonia*—or towards Intellectual Curiosity or Holy Compassion or Deep Beauty. Those being *kerygma*, *diakonia*, or *leitourgia*. Whether or not you attended the Town Hall, I hope that take the time to discern where and how you are most connected to this place. We are the Episcopal branch of the Jesus movement, as our Presiding Bishop says: God's vineyard

in this corner of Portland. We grow and thrive because of our connection to God and to one another

The life-giving connection John speaks of comes with a warning label, though. When it flows—like water, like sap in the vine—it almost always takes us places we didn't plan to go. Philip knew what his source was, and because of that he wasn't afraid to share it with someone who defied the conventional categories of righteous personhood. Nathan knows what his source is, and because of that he is not afraid to follow his beloved James into a culture he was initially averse to. Jerry knows what his source is, and because of that he's generous to share coffee and cookies with protesters who proclaim hate. Mary knows what her source is, and because of that she listens for God in the stories of homeless people. Pam and Tim know what their source is, and because of that they lead us into relationship with the immigrant other. Rule knows what her source is, and from it flows words of love and encouragement to those who are hurting.

I know what my source is, too, which is what compels this daughter of atheists to stand before you and say with confidence that God longs to be connected to you and abide in you. You are not lost; you are God's treasured possession. You are not alone; you are the sheep of God's flock. You are not a raisin—you know I had to say it—you are the well-loved branches where the grapes of wisdom and justice grow.