Tree of Life – the Vine and the Branches

We live in a connected world. For many of us, barely a moment goes by when we are not plugged in to something – the phone in our hand, the computer on the desk or the lap, the tablet where we play our games or watch our movies, the kindle where we read. We are constantly interfacing with one another through technology, whether it is texting or email or facebook or Instagram or twitter. We are always connected to others, always communicating. If we are disconnected we feel lost. We are not sure what to do.

Those connections are immediate. They are constant. They make us feel like we’re a part of the world. Often the relationships we form through social media seem very real indeed. Yet they are often brief and superficial. They can be cut off in an instant if power goes out, a battery dies or an internet connection fails or, God forbid, if someone unfriends you.

The connection Jesus describes in today’s scripture is a different kind of connection. It is deeper, longer lasting. “Abide in me,” Jesus says. “Abide.” Stay. Remain. Rest. And the image he uses is an organic one. “I am the Vine, you are the branches.” The branches and the vine are connected because they are part of a single, living whole plant. They depend on one another. The branches draw life from the sap flowing through the vine. They depend on the vine for support. Without that vine, they have no independent existence. They wither and die. When they are connected to the vine, they are alive and growing and producing good and abundant fruit.

That image is both appealing and challenging. “Yes,” our spirits breathe. “Yes. I want that connection. I want to be part of something bigger than I am. I want to be hooked in to the source of life. “ “But no!” another part of our mind speaks up. “I want to be in charge of my own decisions. I want to be independent and live on my own. I don’t want to depend on anyone else to get me through life.”

Yet the image of the vine tells us that if we think we can survive on our own, we are living with an illusion. We humans are meant to live in community. A human infant left alone would die. Adults become somewhat more self-sufficient, but we still rely on each other both physically and emotionally to make it through. We have to stay connected. And even beyond that human connection is the connection to God, the connection that gave us life in the first place, the connection that sustains us in life and beyond life. We must abide in Christ, or we weaken and fall and fail.

In the orthodox church, there is an icon called Christ the Tree of Life or Christ the Living Vine. It shows Christ seated in the midst of a tree or gigantic grapevine holding the open gospel on his lap, his other hand raised in blessing. Around him on the branches of the vine are the twelve apostles, each with his own scroll in hand.

This image points to the reality that Colossians speaks of in the passage that I read this morning: that Christ is the center of all things. In him all things hold together. He is the source and center of life.

We said that ourselves as we developed the vision for our renewed church: that we would be a church with Christ at the center. As we have been working on our logo, that is the one significant change we have made to the artist’s original design: that the cross of Christ is now at the center of the tree of life, providing structure, bringing life.

Think for a minute about what it means to have Christ and his cross at the center – the cross the symbol of shame and death to the Romans, the symbol of life for us. Yesterday at PTS graduation, President Barnes described Jesus as one who is dying to love us. That’s true. He literally died because he loved us. What an amazing gift of love. What does it mean to you to know that someone – that God’s son – loves you that much?

Then you, he said, should also be dying to love. To love Jesus as he loves you, yes, but also to love your neighbors – to love your enemies – with that same kind of love that is a giving of the whole self. That’s what it means to have the cross of Christ at the center.

“Abide in me as I abide in you.” Jesus says. “Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.” The “you” here is plural. Jesus is speaking not just to individuals, but to the group of his disciples – the group that would become the church. We need to pay attention to his words. It is far too easy to be centered, to abide, in something else – in whatever program is the next big thing, in our own sense of self-worth, in some human leader who seems to have all the right things to say. But if we want to bear fruit, we can’t do it unless we keep our connection with Jesus.

We face another danger as well. That danger is the danger of sending out too many branches, too many shoots, trying to do too many things at once. Left to itself, a grapevine sends out lovely leafy branches all over the place, lush and green. But all the plant’s energy goes into those lovely leafy branches and not into producing fruit. In order to produce abundant fruit, those great bunches of sweet purple grapes, the vine has to be pruned so its energy can be directed in the right place. We also must allow ourselves to be pruned even as we grow so we don’t throw off shoots in all directions and lose track of what we are really here for: bearing fruit for God’s kingdom.

While we meet all people with compassion, we are not primarily a social service organization. While we enjoy being together, we are not primarily a social group. While we like growing things, we are not a gardening group. We are a church, the church of Jesus Christ. We need to stay focused on that central identity. We need to stay connected with Jesus. If we allow ourselves to be distracted, if we throw off too many of those excess shoots, then we will not bear fruit.

What is the fruit God wants us to bear? I know we look around at the pews and think about new members for our church, and yes, that is certainly one kind of fruit we’d like to bear. But it’s not just about bodies in the pews, or even primarily about bodies in the pews. The fruit of the true vine is shown in a deeper life of the spirit, in speaking with passion, in acting with compassion. It is shown in a life of discipleship flowing from and directed to Christ who is our center. The fruit of the spirit grows from love and is shown in love, for God, for one another and for each person we meet.

 “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. 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.” Let us abide in Christ, the Vine, Christ the tree of life so we may bear much fruit.