

My sisters and brothers in Christ,

Last Sunday and today the Gospel lesson featured “I am” texts. “I am” – Jesus describing himself, so that his disciples, so that we, can better understand him. Last Sunday we heard that Jesus was not just a shepherd, but the *good* shepherd. Today, we hear “I am the true vine.” Not just any vine, but the *true* vine. It’s easy to imagine Jesus as a shepherd – we see pictures of Jesus carrying a shepherd’s crook, often with sheep and children around him. But a vine? A woody stem growing out of the ground with branches on it? It’s hard to imagine. But it’s a nice metaphor.

In the Hebrew Bible, the vine is a symbol of Israel. You find this metaphor in Isaiah, in Jeremiah, in Ezekiel and elsewhere. In the Old Testament, Israel is described as God’s chosen vine, *his* vineyard, nurtured with loving care. He led the Hebrew people out of bondage. But, these vines turned out to be disappointing to God. The people of ancient Israel were disobedient and unfruitful. They yielded bitter grapes.

But God gave his people another chance: Here is the Son of God, Jesus of Nazareth, telling his disciples that he is the *true* vine, the faithful vine. He is not a disappointment to the Father. In contrast to the disobedient people of Israel, Jesus is the *true* vine. And this true vine, *with its branches*, have become a new and fruitful people of God. Jesus is not only the good shepherd who will die for his people. He also is the true vine that brings his people to faithfully love and cherish God. But vines cannot produce the best crop without special care. They need to be tended and pruned. The fruitless branches are cut off, so that the plants’ strength can flow to the healthy and bearing branches. Such a pruning could be severe. But, what was cut off was worthless to the plant.

This pruning described by Jesus also had a religious significance. At certain times of the year, Hebrew people were to bring offerings of wood to the Temple for altar fires. But *pruned* wood of the vine was specifically not brought because it was not good and not worthy for a religious fire. It had to be burned separately as trash. This was unclean wood, spiritually wretched, without redeeming qualities.

And so we hear Jesus telling his followers that they have been made clean by the word he has spoken to them. They are not like cast-off worthless branches. They have been cleansed by the word of Christ. A powerful thought – they have received the revelation of God in Jesus. Pruning cuts the non-essential so that the righteous core can thrive, and we thrive as branches of Christ Jesus.

The world we live in is God’s vineyard. There is one word that describes this relationship. The word is *abide*. And if you were counting, it occurred 8 times in this morning’s Gospel passage. But it does not appear in *any other Gospel*. It is a word of such profound meaning that it sums up where we should be in relation to Christ and the Father. “Abide in me as I abide in you,” Christ said. It does not mean just to live in, or just to have faith in. It means all of that and much more.

I think that *to abide* means that we *give* ourselves over to something, at the same time that we *open* ourselves to receive something. We are absorbed, just as we absorb. We become different, we become new by what becomes part of us. We live in Christ, as Christ lives in us. We are completed by abiding *in* Christ, as Christ abides in us. Abiding in Christ means living out our union with him through our baptismal creed. It means living out our union with him in love, faith and obedience – putting self second, and God first. It means living out our union through the Holy Communion – the visible and spiritual manifestation of how Christ abides in us and we in him.

So in God’s vineyard, Jesus is the true vine, and we are the branches. Life flows from the vine to the branches. Abiding in Christ is dynamic and energizing. And the fruit we bear is evident in good works, in mission and in community. One cannot be a Christian alone – we are part of the body of Christ. Jesus put it very simply: “I am the true vine.”

The whole point of the “I am” sayings is to answer the question Who Is Jesus? How Jesus explained his essence to others. I am...the good shepherd -- the true vine -- the bread of life -- the way, the truth -- the light of the world. These are very touching sacred metaphors that really do help us understand him – but they don’t tell us everything we need to know. They tell us about the divine nature of Jesus. But Jesus was both divine *and human*.

Remember the words of our *Eucharistic Prayer D*: the father sent his only son to be our savior – and the son lived as one of us, yet without sin. And *Eucharistic Prayer A* reminds us that the Father sent Jesus Christ to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us.... Who is Jesus? What is his *human* nature? His humanity began with his birth. Was he born into a royal family? No. Into a well-to-do merchant family. No. Into a family of rabbis? No. He was born into a family at the other end of the social spectrum. He was, you could say, lowly born.

No room at the inn? Was the inn really full? – or was that just another way of saying to Joseph and Mary that their kind was not acceptable – social rejection that persisted in our own society well into the present.

According to Matthew’s Gospel, Joseph was a carpenter. According to Mark’s Gospel, Jesus himself was a carpenter. Each of us is conditioned by, and we react to, the society in which we live – and by our place in that society. It could not be otherwise – and that was true for Jesus as well.

Do we want to know about his preferential option for the poor, the ill, the downtrodden? Or why he associated with so-called outcasts? Do we want to know why he overturned the tables of the money changers in the Temple who exploited the faithful? Or why he said: you cannot serve God and wealth? – you will hate one and love the other, or love one and hate the other? Or why he praised the poor widow who gave two tiny coins – the widow’s mite – in the Temple, and why he questioned the motives of the rich? Examples abound.

His life experience shaped his sense of social justice, which was honed with his knowledge of scripture and being a lector in synagogues. And you remember that he annoyed a lot of people in synagogues by what he said.

Who is Jesus? In our contemporary American language, we could say that Jesus of Nazareth was a working class kid. He worked construction. He built. He probably had known tough jobs and tough times – and he also knew about that first hand from those around him. He knew what it was to be a worker.

The “I am” sayings describe his divine nature. But living as one of us shaped his human nature. ✠

