

Sermon by Rev. Anne Miner-Pearson
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Love in John's Gospel

On a closer look, of course, John's gospel would tell us of Jesus using an image of a vine and branches. It is organic. It is real. It both speaks of wholeness and parts at the same time. It shouts "connection" from the deep roots to the little green unrolling leaves at the tip of the young tendrils. It conveys growth with a process we all know about. Grounded in the dark soil, the main trunk reaches skyward just it also thickens. The trunk is strong and flexible at the same time. It is capable of holding on. Yet its branches are also able of letting go, hanging in the breeze, searching for the next point of attachment. Intriguing and scary, that point is never an end, but only a pause before continuing. Will the direction be maintained? Or, just as likely, some unforeseen force sends - or coaxes - the exploring branch in a surprisingly new direction. All of this while remaining grounded. All of this while connected to the center vine.

Of course, in John's gospel, Jesus will invite us to imagine ourselves, our lives, all life, as branches, part of an organic web of pulsing, evolving energy. Who else would we expect Jesus to be in John's gospel? John tips us off at the very first: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." Doesn't that Prologue resemble a vine and its branches swinging in the breeze?

When the gospel begins picturing the vast cosmos, the moment of the Big Bang, of course, Jesus is a vine and we are the branches. How else would we imagine love in its many forms: saving love, forgiving love, healing love, love as justice? With love, there is movement. With love, there is risk. With love, there is holding on — and letting go.

But, even more, in John's gospel, with love, there is always "together". Whether as shepherd or vine, Jesus always speaks of love as gathering, connecting, bringing parts into a whole. Last week, it was a sheep and then a flock, and then many flocks. This week it is a vine with branches, branches that can do nothing if separated from the vine. What is vast and cosmic is also intimate and as close as the next cell and breathe.

Of course, this would be Jesus' story written by John. The new life of Easter morning has grown and spread. While the first gospels were written within a decade or so, John writes his later, in the 90's. And unlike the other three, his community is not a smaller community within their Jewish kin. John writes in Ephesus - the second richest and largest city in the Roman Empire after Rome itself. It's in present day Turkey, near the coast. As a seaport, it hosts plethora of tribes from the Mediterranean basin and east to India. Wealthy houses cling to hillsides rising up from the harbor. Multiple temples dot the wide avenues, many dedicated to female goddesses. Hidden under the tendrils of commerce are hundreds of cells supporting a prosperous slave trade. Ephesus is a complex city.

Into this reality comes John, a Christus follower. He is not the first follower of Jesus Christ to arrive in Ephesus. Probably Paul has been there. If not in person, his letters have been read by this young community of Jesus followers. Like all early disciples, those in Ephesus are searching for how to follow

this Jesus. Their encounter with him has drawn their lives and hearts from death to life. From Paul, they puzzle the meaning of the “Body of Christ” as they struggle to learn how to intentionally live beyond the ancient boundaries of tribe. For, from Jesus and Paul, they are called to create a community equally open to all - Jew and gentile, male and female, slave and free.

That bunging Christian community is challenged to live in a vision of love held up to them by both Jesus and Paul. They’re called to imagine a table-gathering defined by other than a blood line, land of birth, color of skin and economic status. They are members of the Body of Christ. They are branches on Jesus’ vine. They are called to include. They are called to a growth spurt!

As far as we know from historical records, this is first community expressing even a vision of pan-tribalism. It’s a radical idea in that time. It’s a radical idea today. But, of course, it makes sense it would be in John’s gospel, written to a pan-tribal community in a pan-tribal city. So, in this gospel, cosmos love and personal love meet at one table. Through the eternal and incarnate “I Am”, God’s love speaks of a new dimension of divine love. As it creates and spreads throughout the galaxy, God’s love is the core powerful enough to connect branches by the same “I am”.

Love was the deepest reality in the beginning. Love is the deepest reality through every branch which comes into being. Love’s pattern is the deepest reality of all creation. In God’s pattern, growth happens by attraction. Atoms, cells, molecules are drawn together and they unite. One cell is linked with another. Yet, in this amazing pattern of love’s energy, something new can occur from a union. From seemingly simple unions emerges complexity with the gift of greater life than either part could offer or imagine.

This is the pattern of the natural world and just as John uses that natural world to speak Christ’s love from the beginning, John’s gospel uses the natural world to reminds us that we are part of God’s growing pattern of love: Jesus is our connection. Jesus is the “I Am” in the flesh. In his life and death and resurrection, he shows us the pattern of out-growing physical, emotional, gender and political limitations of a current time. Jesus calls his disciples and us into having “growth spurts”.

I use that expression because that’s what I feel like I’m having in my life right now. And believe me, at my age, I never thought I’d be saying that. But, that’s a best way to speak of where I find my head and heart right now. I realize Jesus is inviting me to mangle some pretty big stretches in my current ability to love. I have recently have come to know that whatever amount of effort and growing I’ve done so far in my life, stretching to love others has been almost entirely with people who looked, acted, thought and behaved like me. Yes, I lived through the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s - but I was an at-home-mom diapering two babies and living in a suburban conclave.

Yet, wonderfully, I have lived long enough to have experienced the last 5-7 years in America and the last year in the Twin Cities. So, I’ve been given another chance to do something about my branch on Jesus’ vine. And pruning is on the “to-do” list. Cutting out my assumed, learned pronouns for my college grandchildren’s roommates. Opening up spaces in what I thought was our nation’s story so more truth could speak and teach me. Selecting novels and memoirs to give images and words to guide me toward new directions and depths for my desire to love others. Right now, I’m not sure the direction of my branch - I’m just kinda “hanging out there”, trying to discern the breeze of the Holy Spirit.

And isn't that what Jesus is offering us? As branches? As branches connected to him as our vine? To imagine ourselves, our lives, all life, as part of an organic web of pulsing, evolving energy. Who else would we expect Jesus to be. He is leading us into resurrection, new life. Happy Easter.