

“The Vine Which Binds Us Together”

Acts 8:26-40, I John 4:7-21, John 15:1-8

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From the Pulpit

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A Communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, May 2, 2021, Fifth Sunday of Easter, dedicated to the memory of Ma'Khia Bryant, killed in Columbus, April 20, 2021 and to my wife, Susan Sitler for her birthday, to my sister Deborah Kay Ahrens for her birthday and to Axel Lee Scalf, to my newest grandson, born to my daughter, Thalia Lewis and Adam Scalf on May 1, 2021 and always to the glory of God!

“The Vine Which Binds Us Together”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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In John's Gospel, Jesus proclaims seven “I am” statements. You know them. But, let's hear them again: “I am the bread of life” (6:35). “I am the light of the world” (8:12). “I am the gate” (10:9). “I am the good shepherd” (10:11). “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25). “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (14:6). “I am the true vine” (15:1).

Living bread, Light of the world, The sheep-gate, The Good Shepherd, The resurrection and the life, and the way, the truth and the life all reflect Jesus' relationship to his disciples. He pledges to

them that he will nourish them and guide them and protect them, and lead them. He will endow them with life and true knowledge. Now the image of Jesus as the True Vine and the rest of us as the branches crown the rest the “I Am” statements. This metaphor goes beyond all that he has said before and paints a picture of what he will later pray in his prayer for the unity of all: *“May all be one, as you Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us”* (which is the motto of our United Church of Christ). By using the image of the vine and branches, Jesus explains that we are in an intimate and inextricable relationship. We are part of him and we are part of one another.

The image of “the true vine” draws us in to explore the depths of our connection to God in life. It reminds us that whether or not we recognize it, we are dependent on God. At the same time, both the image and Jesus’ prayer for unity recognize that it is up to us to play our part.

Our life and potential come from God, but we are the ones who choose to bear fruit or to choke ourselves off from the vine.

All seven of the “I Am” self-descriptions in John’s Gospel invite us into a much deeper understanding of Christ and ourselves as disciples. We can contemplate the image of the vine – like that of the shepherd and bread of life – as God’s rationale for creation and the Incarnation. Each of the statements describes how God reaches out to creation in love. Each statement also invites us to respond – to be the branches, to be God’s flock, to seek God’s light, to eat the bread of life, and to know from where our life comes, and to return thanks.

John 15 reminds us that we must be continually choosing to truly show that we are part of this vine. God always offers us the option of being fruitful branches, receiving and giving divine life. But there is another option. We can choose not to be fruitful. We can choose to be fruitless. That's right. We can choose to be fruitless. We can choose to say nothing, to do nothing, to be nothing, to give nothing, to go nowhere, to ask no questions, to challenge nothing in this world – to do what is just NOTHING. It is also a choice.

Here is the irony – the difference between being fruitful or fruitless happens with the pruning of the branches.

In the Gospel – as well as in the Garden - the fruit-bearing branches of the vines are pruned, and the fruitless branches are removed.

The word translated “pruned” literally means “to cleanse,” “to purge,” “to purify.” The verb is commonly used in inscriptions of ceremonial cleansing. It is not the normal word for pruning. There is a gardening term for pruning, but that is not what Jesus is talking about here. Jesus is talking about people rather than vines. To understand what Jesus was saying about people, however, it is helpful to understand something about vines.

In my family, there is one gardener. Susan is the gardener. She knows what she doing while I carry the tools or perhaps carry the mulch or dirt – or whatever she tells me to carry. I am prone to step on the plants that are fruitful or life-giving. She, on the other hand, knows every plant and every weed. She knows what to nurture and what to pull out of the garden. So, in our garden she tells me what to do and I do it – always with a prayer that I am not

yanking fruitful plants from the earth (even though she has pointed them out to me at least 2 or 3 times).

A number of years ago, we were pruning the vines on our back fence. She told me how and where to cut them. It all seemed severe to me. It felt like I was destroying the vines by cutting them down so far that they would die. So, being me, the assistant gardener, I grumbled. I questioned. I complained when the branches cut my arm. But, as the assistant gardener, I just kept pruning all the while asking for God's forgiveness for destroying the grapevine in my yard. When I was done, I was absolutely convinced I had been a part of the butchery of the branches. I couldn't look at the branches. I kept asking for their forgiveness. But as the summer wore on and the branches began to grow and bear fruit, I was blown away that life had returned to the once mangled branches of the vines. I also had to admit that Susan was right – again. Pruning saved the vines.

I believe – all of us fail at some level to prune the things in our lives. We all have behaviors that need to change. We remain inactive and nonresponsive because we're afraid to fail or we are afraid that when we do something, it will die. Our fears and our anxieties keep us from living more pruning and thus from living more abundantly.

So, what is it that needs to be pruned in your life? What needs to become fruitful from the fruitlessness of your actions or inactions; your passivity or your passions out of control? I have a list I have been working on and others could add to my list, I am sure. But I am getting my pruning shears sharpened to cut back, to trim away, to deal with the dead, fruitless branches of my life. It won't be easy. But it is necessary to prune – “to cleanse,” “to purge,” “to purify”

– in order to get it right and allow for new life to blossom and flourish in my life and in the life of my family and community. All of us are faced with the same things. We need pruning, too. In the coming weeks and months, we as a church need the renewal that comes from real pruning. As we return to worship and life together in-person, we need to figure out what needs to be cut down so that true renewal can happen – so that a flourishing of life and faith can happen. We have to walk carefully in the garden of God. We don't want to crush real life and hope. We don't want to destroy. In the words of the prophet Jeremiah, what must be “plucked up” should be plucked up. And what must be planted, will be planted for God to flourish in our life together. We will have to figure that out.

In our community of Columbus and Central Ohio, we also need to prune the fruit-bearing branches and remove the fruitless branches. As our community laid 16-year-old Ma'Khia Bryant to rest on Friday after she was shot four times and killed by a Columbus police officer on April 20, I found myself weeping about Ma'Khia and the broken relationships of our police and community following the death of the 26th citizen – 95% of whom have been Black – at the gun point of our Columbus police in the last five years is at its worst point ever. It is heartbreaking that we are second in the nation in the economic gap between White and Black people in Columbus. Cincinnati and Cleveland have had two police shootings and deaths in the past year, and while two is too many, we have had five in the past five months. We are also ahead of Chicago, Los Angeles, and Boston for per capita deaths of African Americans by our police. We rank 18th out of 100 cities for this

statistic – and we have had three more such deaths in the past six weeks.

As well, we have had double the homicides in the first four months of 2021 over 2020 – which had been our worst year for citizens killing other citizens of Columbus in the long history of our city. I talked to a friend last night, and he had just presided over the funeral of 15-year-old boy who had been shot by another 15-year-old in an argument that left one dead and the other in critical condition in the hospital. This has to end!

For five months BREAD – Building Responsibility Equally And Dignity – has been researching police reform and continuing to press for reforms in our gun violence initiatives. We have come up with reality-based, research-based solutions for both the increased deaths in police shootings and other increases in gun violence. These are tried and true initiatives that have worked in other cities and we believe could work here.

For 21 years we have all been members of BREAD. For 21 years, I have invited you to the Nehemiah Action each May. I believe our 2021 Nehemiah Action – which will be held in a parking lot and on Zoom – will be our most important one ever. There are no excuses for any of us to either Drive-in or Zoom-in on Tuesday, May 11th for part or all of the action from 6:45-8:30pm. We can literally put an ear-piece in and listen while cooking our dinners, getting our children ready for bed, or walking our dogs. You can be (and I believe MUST be) part of the largest gathering of Jews, Muslims and Christians working for justice anywhere in Ohio and one of the largest organizations in the nation of faith-filled people seeking change. Let's be part of the solutions to end the spiral of violence and death in our community.

I encourage you – no matter who you are or where you are when you hear this – to go to our links in today’s Depart to Serve, to our website or email me and sign up for the Nehemiah Action TODAY– and we will get to a parking spot or a zoom link. If we are to be part of the solution of the madness of gunning down and killing people in our city and region. This is our moment. Let’s be part of the solution. Let’s be part of turning this around. Let’s be part of pruning the tree and the vine to make our community healthy again.

As the First Letter of John tells us, *“Let us love not in word or speech, but in deed and truth.”* The proof of commitment is not in words and speech but deeds and truth. We can do it. We can be the change we want to see.

Our True Vine, Jesus our Savior, is calling us to be fruitful – in our personal lives, in our life together as a faith community, as members of the larger Columbus and Central Ohio Community, even more as citizens in our great nation crying out for fruitful people to lead loving and fruit-filled lives. To bear no fruit is a choice – but not a choice that is designed and guided by the Will of God.

As we turn to God’s Table of Grace, let us remember that for John, belief in Jesus was never an intellectual exercise. Rather, belief was and remains to this day, the motivator for all our life’s activities and actions. The True Vine which binds us together is calling us to prune the branches and produce fruit for our lives. Or as Jesus simply said to each us in today’s Gospel – *“Abide in my love.”*

Let's get the pruning shears out. Let's get to work so we can produce a harvest of love for ourselves and for others – in the name of our True Vine. Amen.

Statistics are drawn from Ceili Doyle's article in *The Columbus Dispatch* on Saturday, May 1, 2021. Also references from Sr. Mary McGlone's reflection on Easter 5 in *National Catholic Reporter* for the week of April 26-April 30, and from *UCC Weekly Seeds* by the Rev. Dr. Cheryl Lindsay for the 5th Sunday of Easter.