

**Rev. Kevin V. Madigan**  
**Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel, NYC**  
**May 2, 2021 Streaming Mass**  
**Easter 5th Sunday of Year B John15:1-8**

Last Sunday we heard Jesus speak about sheep and of Himself as the “Good Shepherd.” Today we hear Him use another agricultural metaphor, as He speaks of Himself as the “vine” and of His disciples as “the branches.” Just as most of us don't know much about raising sheep or the role of a shepherd, probably the same could be said about the whole process of producing a fine wine, except perhaps to say after drinking a particularly fine vintage, “That tastes pretty good.” The true connoisseur of wines can go on and on about how the combination of sun and soil and rain and elevation can produce the specific qualities of a wine that make it truly unique. In fact, the wine produced on one side of a road can have features that make it quite different from that produced on the other side, and only a refined palate can tell the difference. Obviously this does not refer to the kind of wine you can buy in a cardboard container with a screw-on cap.

Let me tell you this little story about how the French wine industry was almost destroyed in the 19th century. Perhaps it can illustrate how essential is the vine in producing healthy grapes and, at the same time, preserving the unique quality of each vintage, each type of grape. In the 1860s a tiny insect called phylloxera was introduced into Europe, beginning with France and soon spreading to other parts of the continent. It caused such devastation to the wine industry that by 1890 somewhere between two thirds and ninety per cent of all European vineyards were destroyed. Certainly, this was a crisis of epic proportions. All sorts of solutions were tried, but the challenge was to find a rootstock, a vine, that was resistant to the insect, but at the same time would not change the taste, the quality, of the grape. That was the tricky part; the last thing they wanted was some generic Chardonnay or Burgundy. That would be almost as bad as no wine at all.

Finally, they discovered a rootstock, a vine, from the United States that was resistant to this sap-sucking aphid, so that the branches could be grafted on to it, and thus survive the phylloxera plague, while at the same time preserving the distinctive qualities of the grape. Before you boast to any of your European friends how America saved their wineries, we should make note of the fact the disease was most likely introduced to Europe by some cuttings that were imported to France from the United States around 1860.

So, back to “I am the vine and you are the branches.” We can see how essential

is a vine that is healthy, that brings nourishment to the branches, to the grapes; it sustains the very life of the grape. And here's the point that is sometimes overlooked—it allows that grape to be precisely what it is supposed to be; that unique blend of sun and soil and rain, and all those other little things that are part of its essential make up. It is this wonderful combination of so many different elements that in due time—and this is another important factor as well—time, aging, a slow transformation that eventually produces the wine that brings joy, exhilaration, celebration, community.

Why might Jesus have chosen this particular image, “I am the vine and you are the branches?” There is a danger in thinking of Jesus is just a moral teacher, an exemplar of moral values. Certainly Jesus is all that, but He is more than that. Limiting Jesus to just that runs the risk of keeping him distance, remote, even judging. The image of the “vine and branches” conveys instead this sense of connectedness, of unity. This metaphor conveys something about who and what Jesus is that becomes part of who and what we are as well, while, at the same time, not denying or abolishing our identity, our uniqueness.

Throughout St. John's Gospel Jesus says again and again that what He possesses He has received from the Father. And what is that? It is the Love that is the reality of God, the essence of God. Jesus is the embodiment, the enfleshment, the incarnation of the Love that is God. His desire is that this same energy, force, capacity be given to us, that this Love enlighten us, energize us, enable us to flourish, to be productive, to bear fruit. In baptism we are joined, we are “grafted” on to the risen Christ, so that the same energy of love that flows through Him can now flow through us, that we can become like other Christ's, but each of us in his or her own unique way. Like a fine wine, we can allow all the elements of our life experiences to mellow, to be transformed, so that in the end what is produced is the unique blend of who we are--that special vintage. What can be said of wine can be said of people to. Some are sweet, some dry; some mellow, some flinty; some flowery and some tart; some elegant, some earthy; some smooth, some gritty; some noble, some coarse. Hopefully of none of us can it be said that we are insipid, harsh or bitter, but that we possess a certain depth and character. And, probably of all of us, it could be said that while we have had our good years, there were also some that were not quite so good. Just as wine has many varieties, so do the lives of all God's children.

The point Jesus making is that we can't achieve this all on our own, i.e., become the kind of person God would have us be. We need that constant nourishment, that very life-support which comes from being connected, united, joined to Him. That is the way we can flourish in the manner that ultimately matters. For as St. Teresa of Avila once wrote, “The final measure of any human life is not the wealth we have amassed,

nor the prestige attached to our name, but the simple measure of love—how we have given ourselves to those who come across our path the course of our lifetime. That is the true measure of a life.”

There is an adage in the realm of Catholic theology that says “grace builds on nature,” in this case human nature. It means that God works with what God has made. God works with all our quirks, talents, capabilities to transform us into people created in His image, into people capable of truly loving, all the while preserving the uniqueness of who each of us is. Let us pray that we can allow ourselves to be open to that transformation, because we are connected to the Source of life, the Source of love.