

Fifth Sunday of Easter
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
Rev. Jason Glombicki
April 29, 2018

Jesus's words are jarring to American culture. According to the "Hofstede cultural dimensions scale," America is the most individualist country.¹ Individualism is taught from a young age when parents stress self-reliance with solitary sleeping, in comparison to the practice of co-sleeping in collectivist cultures. Playdates in individualistic countries are carefully interspersed with downtime to rest and recover, as opposed to the constant company within collectivist cultures. While individualistic cultures, like America, do not necessarily lead to solitary-living, relationships are weaker than in countries where collectivism is culturally dominant.² So, when we put our individualistic culture in conversation with today's Gospel reading, it's expected that we'll feel uncomfortable.

Why might we feel this way? First, we find that we have no control in Jesus's metaphor. We're not the vinegrower choosing where to prune, and we're not the trunk of the vine providing nutrients to the plant. Instead, we are the branches. We don't even have autonomy to grow where we wish, instead we find ourselves pruned by an outside force to produce fruit. As Americans born and bred on ideologies like "rugged individualism," we might want to tell God to "bugger off" because we can pull up our boot straps all by ourselves.

That's not the only unsettling aspect in today's reading. Even Jesus's chosen image is meant to destabilize our individualistic tendencies. You see, while the image of a vine might be foreign to

¹ <http://www.clearlycultural.com/geert-hofstede-cultural-dimensions/individualism/>

² <http://www.dimensionsofculture.com/2013/09/how-individualism-and-collectivism-manifest-in-child-rearing-practices/>

our religious experience, in Judaism a vine is a common metaphor. In the Hebrew Bible, God was often cast as a vinegrower while Israel, that is God's people, was the vine. In today's reading, however, Jesus subverts this understanding. God is still the vinegrower, but *Jesus* is the vine, and God's people are the vine's branches.³ This shift is meant to refocus our connection to Jesus, reminding us that we receive our sustenance and direction from God alone.

And Jesus's metaphor is even more disruptive to our way of life when we discover what being a part of a large vine means for us as branches. After all, vines don't run in straight lines and they don't move about separately. Instead they wrap around items and they bunch together because they come from the same main trunk. So too, as God's people we receive nourishment from Jesus's teachings, ministry, and life-giving resurrection, *and* we will get tangled and twisted with other cruddy, unruly, and self-centered branches – other branches that act a lot like you and me.⁴

You see, today's passage is the furthest thing from our culture's individualism. God prunes us for the sake of unity and abundance. While pruning might feel like a negative thing, there's nothing to fear. In fact, some plants need to be pruned to bloom into their full potential. So too, God's pruning is a gift that alters our direction, refocuses our lives, and shifts our viewpoints so that we might bear *more* fruit, and, if you keep reading, we find that by "fruit" Jesus means love.

Through the waters of baptism, God prunes and shapes. God cuts off our tendency to think that we better grab what we can because there isn't enough to go around. We are pruned to be reminded that we are God's children. So, instead of selfishly curling up on our ego, rather than coiling around our own faults and fears, and instead of believing the lie that we are self-made, we are reminded that our nutrients are found in God who provides for our every need. And we find

³ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3631

⁴ <http://thq.wearesparkhouse.org/yearb/easter5gospe/>

that your branch and my branch often intersect, and as such, we are drawn by our God to live interdependently. We are called to recognize that God has abundantly given us gifts that shape and transform us, and from those abundant gifts we can respond in love and grace.

One way I saw this last week was when I was warming up my dinner in the church's kitchen. As I waited for the microwave, someone from Alcoholics Anonymous was talking with me about the water damage in our basement. This particular person has taken up the charge to fundraise for the repair work within the AA meetings. So, I shared with her a lot of details. I told her of the long process of asbestos removal, the issues we uncovered, and the likely price tag of over \$50,000. She was shocked and saddened by the news. She told me that this place, our shared basement, saved her life. She said that if our basement had not been shared so that AA could gather, she probably would not have found God and would not be living today. While she's not a member of this congregation, she is deeply thankful for what was given to her by our God working through this congregation. In her thankfulness, she handed me a few hundred dollars for the repairs and she committed to working with the AA groups to help. You see, her testimony is an example of recognizing God's gifts and then responding to that gift. It's realizing that God nourishes us so that we might respond in love, and that, my friends, is what today's Gospel is all about.

So, as you come to this table to drink the fruit of the vine, be reminded of those in front of you, behind you, and next to you. These people are visible signs of God's resurrection in our midst. For, in the brokenness of our branches, we find a pruning God who makes us whole, a gracious God who shapes us to live life eternal, and a God who nurtures us to bear the fruits of love. Alleluia! Amen.