

## Easter V – May 3, 2015

Acts 8:26-40

Psalm 22:24-30

1 John 4:7-21

John 15:1-8

### Full Bodied with an Earthy Bouquet

*A sermon preached by The Rev. Dianne Andrews at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Port Townsend, WA.*

In the mid 1930's my grandparents moved the family from Kansas to Lodi, California where my grandfather worked for many years as a teacher at Lodi High. My grandparents built their home by hand in the middle of orchards and vineyards, most of which are still surviving around the house, though much of the land in other areas of town has been sold for development. For many years Grandpa Boone taught woodshop, ceramics, and history and was a fixture in the community. The small homestead had an earthy and well-aged feel to it. My memories of visits will forever contain the somewhat musty, aromatic scent that I would later notice when visiting wineries in Napa Valley. During our visits we would get the farm report... the progress of the year's grape crop and market prices, the peril of winter freezes, and the worst that could happen... autumn rain that can promote the growth of mold and fungus can endanger the entire grape harvest. Every year was different. Some years were spectacular. Either way, in late August grapes would be harvested and crushed, eventually to become regional specialties of old vine Zinfandel, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Sauvignon Blanc. The Lodi Grape Festival occurs yearly, in late September, to celebrate the harvest after which there is time to rest until the mid-winter pruning that takes place when the vines are dormant.

Grapes have been cultivated since the Neolithic period over 7,000 years ago. The oldest known winery, believed to be 4,000 years old, is located in Armenia. The evidence of ancient winemaking like wine presses, vats and jars that have been unearthed. The cycle of harvesting, crushing, and the alchemy of fermentation continues to this day, now with an abundance of experience and science to inform grape growers and vintners. Wine is grown on every continent except Antarctica, and production ranges from simple table wines to the high vintages for the moneyed connoisseur.

Imbibing alcoholic beverages for the sake of numbing pain, and even checking out, is as old as the wine press. In doing my research for this Sunday I found a *Vanity Fair* article entitled "10 Red Wines for 10 of Life's Biggest Problems." (Alex Beggs, Oct 2015). The article is clearly not dealing with "life's biggest problems." It was written as entertainment... to sell magazines and wine. The author begins the article, "I love any excuse to drink red wine (here's winking at you, Church), but somehow it just tastes better when everything in your life is falling apart." I picked just a few of the suggested wine pairings:

- *Just broken up: how about a Sicilian Rosso*
- *Your kid asked for help on a college message: try \$75 bottle Grand Cru from Bordeaux*
- *Your landlord raises the rent: go to lower end bodega wines*
- *Got a bad haircut: how about a nice Shiraz... your hair will grow out in two weeks*
- *New shoes ruined in a torrential downpour: a French Malbec will do the trick*

What an interesting exercise... but 10 biggest life problems? This article is purely for entertainment... and, O.K., it caught my interest.

...and then I think about the really big problems. I think about human suffering of all kinds, including the suffering of addiction. I think about the tens of thousands who are grieving, hungry and homeless in Nepal... I think about the ravages of domestic violence.... I hear the ongoing cries for a more equitable and just society rising from anger and frustration and grief in Baltimore, rooted in entrenched systems that create despair and hopelessness... despair that is often medicated with drugs and alcohol in a vicious cycle that screams for healing and greater opportunity.

In our lesson from the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel according to John, Jesus is in the midst of giving his long farewell discourse that covers a full four chapters. Jesus gives his final teachings to the disciples after the Last Supper on the eve of his crucifixion. In today's portion we get the final "I am" statement from Jesus as he says, "I am the true vine.... and my father is the vinegrower." This imagery would be well known to the disciples. Jesus was offering a vivid image of the connection and caring that endures in divine love that is grater than all else, including death. The ancient Sumerian character for life was the grape leaf... the Tree of Life... Jesus was pointing to the source to which we are all connected. After this illustration about vines Jesus gives the Great Commandment: *"that you love one another as I have loved you... there is no greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."* (John 15:12-13)

Under the outer bark of wines there are two systems that flow in constant motion. A layer called the *zylem* transports water and stored nutrients from the roots sending them up and out into the branches and leaves. A second layer, the *phloem*, consists of fibrous tubes that carry the products of photosynthesis from green leaves, down through the branches, into the vine and down into the roots where they are stored as carbohydrates. This is a two-way, reciprocal system of conveying the stuff of life necessary to bear fruit. The roots need to be firmly planted in the earth. The branches and leaves need to reach heavenward, towards the sunlight.

In the English language the three verbs "to live," "to love," and "to believe" appear to be variations on a single root word. "Laufen" can mean "to run" "to flow" or "to follow course." Add the prefix "be" and the verb is emphasized: "believe" "beloved" are broadenings of the root meaning to flow. A true knowledge of this means truly feeling, in our innermost parts, the flow of love and life that originates in God.

There is a story about literal life blood that has been kicking around for decades in various arenas. Some believe that is true, others do not. Anne Lamott tells a version of it in her book *Bird by Bird*. There was a family in a small Buddhist community in Asia. Their three-year-old daughter, who had been diagnosed with leukemia, was in need of a blood transfusion. Every member of the family was tested to see if any one of them would be a match for a direct blood transfusion. The match turned out to be her ten-year-old brother. When his parents asked if he would be willing to give blood for his sister he said that he needed some time to think about it. A full day later he said that he would do it. At the hospital the boy was laying on a gurney, prepped, stuck with a needle and hooked up to the with the blood donor equipment. As he lay still, watching his blood flow from his arm toward his sister, the boy became very pale. The nurse bent over him, and asked if he was okay. He said "Yes." Then he asked, "How soon until I start to die?" ...a story about the literal flowing of the essence of life and of true sacrificial love.

We come here to church, Sunday by Sunday, to reconnect to the source of life that we know in Christ and in the truth that was revealed in great love and sacrifice, a love that is greater than death, a love that continues to nourish us in the sacrament of Christ's body and blood. Church is not simply a building... as beautiful or as plain as a building may be. All that is required is a table and a people gathered, through the waters of baptism, to be fed in Word and Sacrament that we may go out into the world to bear fruit, to show God's love in word and deed, in advocacy and in our choices.... doing so in the context in which we are planted... paying attention to the hungers, the needs, the sufferings and the conditions in our midst.... being mindful and compassionate... then coming back again to "the source" for renewal... and continuing to live into the cycle of life and love. We are called, not simply to go to church, but to "be church," ... a people, a community coursing with divine life and sustenance... abiding in God.

Ah yes, we musn't forget "the pruning." I went to my bookshelf and pulled out *"Pruning: A Highly Practical & Comprehensive Guide that Explains this Essential Gardening Technique in a Sensible and Creative Way."* A mouthful! The book jacket of my book on pruning starts out "Few gardening techniques have been cloaked in as much mystique as pruning, yet it is essentially a simple and logical process." My knee jerk reaction to being pruned is ... wincing at the thought!.... I don't want to yield... I want to be able to manage it all on my own... to choose what stays, and what goes... but then I am not the expert. My vision is limited. Our loving God knows best how to achieve the greatest yield of love and service and knows, better than I, what needs to be removed and how I need to be shaped to come into optimum alignment with the flow of love that moves between heaven and heart and from vine to vine.

Italians say, "Wine is the poetry of the earth." Galileo said, "Wine is sunlight held together with water." Jesus said, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower." It is in this flow of life and love... we in God and God in us... that we are connected in compassion with all of humanity and the whole of creation. Joined together in this flow the harvest is plentiful.. and beyond measure... delicious... full of body and life.

*Amen...*