

Sermon April 29, 2018 Abide, Awhile Cara B. Hochhalter

Psalm 22:25-31 and John 15:1-8

Do any of you remember the grape boycott of the late 60's. It was an effort by Cesar Chavez but also a woman named Delores Huerta (there is a wonderful new documentary about her life that I would recommend!) This was in California where nonviolent demonstrations and protests were so good at getting the word out, that all across the country, people gave up buying grapes so that change would come for the farmworkers. United Farm Workers union paid attention and the people who do the hard work of harvesting crops, were paid a little more fairly and there was a new sense of justice in their workplaces.

I may have told you about when I worked for Michigan Migrant Ministry in 1968 on the Old Mission Peninsula where beautiful cherries are grown. Some migrant workers were treated fairly and others not. These families who came north from Mexico and Texas worked long hours reaching into the pesticide thick branches that gave off a sickening sticky smell.... On a blistering hot day, I heard a farmworker ask for drinking water from the farmer riding by on his tractor. The farmer pointed to Lake Michigan that was visible, but miles away...and said, "There is all the water you can drink."

Still today, people who pick our crops struggle to receive the dignity and respect they deserve for this backbreaking work that puts food on our tables...

Let us be in prayer: Justice-loving God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts together, be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The metaphor of the vine was familiar to people of Jesus' time. The Hebrew Scriptures referred to the vine as the people of Israel and God as the one who tends it. The fruit of the vine was justice...and ruin would come upon the vineyard where injustice flourished.....ruin would come where injustice flourished.

I just heard about the passing of the Rev. James Cone... He grew up in Arkansas where his father was once threatened with lynching. Rev. Cone taught at Union Theological Seminary for 50 years, wrote many books, a couple of which I have read, and he was the founder of Black Liberation Theology... This man of deep faith came to realize that God and Jesus had been white-washed when he started to see the Gospel through his eyes as a black man.

He said that justice for the poor was at the very heart of what the Gospel is about and the very heart of what God is doing in the world.

The fruit of the vine...is justice.

The vine image of John's is different than what Paul wrote later when he talked about one body with different parts. That one held up each of our unique gifts while this image of the Vine unites us all in one great source of life-giving love within which we are rooted.

I listened to an interview with a professor of physics, last night, Dr. Carlo Rovelli. He said that while we think our world is made up of many *things*, reality is really all about "interactions, intertwined relationships...and that all around us is a constant wave of happenings!" Nothing is static, but always changing and growing...and we find ourselves, beautifully, in this mix.

Now, to give ourselves a little grounding, Jesus said to "abide" in me. I love this word, *abide!* Spending time--- with. Having a home---in. Abide. HOW do we abide...in God/Christ/Spirit in each moment? Like my little book about *God as the Ocean*...perhaps we live IN this richness of Holiness, whether we recognize it or not.... and it can ground us in love.

This story comes just after Jesus had had the Passover meal with his disciples...some say it was the Last Supper...and Jesus says to "Rise and be on our way." And then begins this long farewell speech. So he's got two things going on here...Abide in Holiness, live in that place... as you also rise up to do good works....to bear the fruit of justice, compassion, kindness and respect for others.

Abide...*and* live unconditional love. I really do not think we can have one without the other.... It is out of a connection with Holiness, that we are empowered to love. If we only abide...living in God but not allowing this energy in us to bear fruit, actions of love and justice in the world...then we may find that we wither from stagnation.

Two things...Abide and Love...Receive and Give.

I had the idea that the image of vines and branches reminds me of this congregation. I think many of you feel connected to this church... like branches of a vine. Am I right? You come here because this community sustains you in some ways...perhaps it provides you with opportunities for service, or with inspiration in worship and music, or with a sense of fellowship and companionship and purpose in this world of ours.

It is an interweaving of all your personalities and talents...but all grounded in the "why" of our church....a deeper connection to a Love larger than any one of us. I pray that you will maintain this connection. The leadership of this church will need all of you to help... I think of John Kennedy when I say "Don't ask what the church can do for you, but what you can do for your church." And what a joy, to give in the ways that each of you do!

The early Christians had a community with whom to live in this way... without Jesus, they carried on living His Way. John O'Day writes, "The mark of the faithful community is how it loves, not who are its members." I think this fits our church, your church... listen again, "*The mark of the faithful community is how it loves, not who are its members.*" This is both the blessing and the challenge for churches to be both so inclusive and welcoming...and at the same time pay attention to the ways we love each other as well as love out into the larger communities....this is what is so beautiful and exciting and challenging...to be church.

Barbara Essex says, "The community that Jesus calls forth is one that embodies an African proverb: Because we are, I am." Now what do you think of that? Because we are, I am. Because of the community, each of you *are*? Or is this perhaps about how God asked to be called, "I am." Perhaps God can only *be*, if we recognize our connections to one another.

No matter where we are, we are of one vine, longing for the wisdom and energy of Divine Holiness together... Jean Baptiste Lacordaire in the 19th century wrote: "We are leaves of one branch, the drops of one sea, the flowers of one garden."

How beautiful...we are only minute parts of a much greater whole!

Now, I have to end with a little talk about pruning. The text talks about the need for some branches to be pruned in order for new growth to happen. You all know how this works.

Jeff and I have been doing a lot of "pruning" around our house...we took 35 plastic bags full of books to Hartford Seminary where they put some in their library and some on for-sale tables for students. It all goes to benefit the seminary that specializes in interfaith relations and the study of world religions. It is a wonderful place.

After we wheeled in the second library cart stuffed full of books...books that had been on my shelves for years...I found myself raising my hand over them and saying,

"Good bye, books!" The librarian smiled and said she understood how it was both sad and good to let go of books that have been useful to us.

We have been going through our stuff...and pruning out what really does not hold much meaning or value for us anymore...Jeff has been patient because I would probably keep three times as much as he would...but it does feel liberating to let go of stuff....it feels freeing....and perhaps will allow for new creativity to take its place.

Perhaps there are habits or attitudes or behaviors that also could be pruned.....perhaps God longs for us to prune any prejudices, greed, selfishness from our lives...to free us up so that we can love more fully, to live more abundantly in our relationships with one another and God....Perhaps if we consciously Abide in God, we cannot help but love abundantly...and live courageously.

Living courageously...for our lives are so intertwined...like the beautiful vines of the grapes.