

Easter 5B
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church
Lakeland, FL
May 2, 2021

Acts 8:26-40
Psalm 22:24-30
1 John 4:7-21
John 15:1-8

For many of us, this reading from the Gospel of John is a favorite. It conjures up satisfying and comforting images. Images of belonging and abiding and fruit. All of this focused on the vine.

Some years ago my family took our first vacation to North Carolina -- White water rafting -- Visiting all of the waterfalls -- Learning to rappel. And simply sitting on the porch. As we explored so many outside places we noticed something -- What was that vine that covered everything? We were introduced to kudzu. This vine of all vines. It's been called "The Vine that Ate the South"

Poet James Dickey warns readers in Georgia to close their windows at night to keep it out of the house -- kudzu. Because of the beauty of its flower, our Japanese neighbors brought it to this country in their garden exhibit at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876. And now -- it is out of control. It can grow as much as a foot a day in the summer -- can grow 60 feet a year.

And in this unconstrained growth, it seriously and permanently damages valuable forests.

When I think of vines, I think of kudzu.

But, when Jesus spoke to his disciples of the vine they would have had a different picture.

The vine in Israel meant a grape vine. The sole purpose of the grape vine is to produce fruit -- it is not particularly decorative, it doesn't provide a nesting place for birds, squirrels don't call it home. It doesn't provide lumber for furniture or homes. The vine produces branches which in turn produce fruit.

So here is Jesus, on the night he would be betrayed by one closest to him, talking with his disciples one last time. And he says "I am the vine." "I am" -- the name of God in the Hebrew Scriptures -- seemingly an audacious claim by Jesus. But, of course, it is true. Jesus who washed his friends' feet is one with the Father, is indeed God. He knows that things are about to change dramatically. These are his last words to those closest to him. Abide in me, y'all. Bear fruit, y'all. Now, why did I say "y'all" y'all might be asking. It is critical to our understanding of what Jesus is saying.

Y'all. Second person plural. More than one, more than "you" -- second person singular. More than me -- 1st person singular. Closer to "we" -- 1st person plural. As a people we are decidedly independent -- it is part of the American way, isn't it. It's reflected in our speech. My way or the highway. What's in it for me? Every man for himself. Pull yourself up by your bootstraps. We have to be reminded in corporate work places that there is "no 'I' in team -- reminded.

We even have national documents extolling it. We proclaim our right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. And, let there be no mistake -- those values are not wrong. But as followers of Jesus, we know that they are only part of the story of our life.

As we continue to be in the midst of a pandemic not experienced for over a century, as we as a society continue to grapple with whether to mask or not, whether to be vaccinated or not, whether or not to go about our daily lives as they were 18 months ago, as all of this swirls around us, we often have lost sight of the “y’all” of our life together. This vine-life we share. This vine-life rooted in Jesus and his life and death and resurrection. This vine life in which we are intertwined with each other. Think kudzu.

But, we are not kudzu – we do not grow in wild ways, uncultivated. Kudzu grows untamed – I understand that it has a beautiful flower and it grows quickly – but it is uncultivated. And in that uncultivated state, it destroys valuable forests.

With the grape vine, things are quite different – in order to produce fruit some radical steps are needed. It must be pruned – and pruned aggressively. These directions come with a new grape plant:

With your plant, you will find a vigorous root system and a lot of bare shoots rising out of the top. At planting time in spring you should **reduce these numerous shoots to one, and cut it back to only three buds.**

Regular, purposeful pruning is essential for controlling the number, position and vigor of fruiting branches and the yield and quality of the fruit.

And, my friends this pruning of the grape vine must occur year after year after year. We tend to think of pruning as something that is hurtful or painful. Instead think of it in terms of the careful action taken by the skilled vine grower so that the vine will grow and flourish and bear good fruit.

Well, I’ve just about exhausted everything that I know about tending grapevines. And that brings us back to “y’all”. Think about the images you may have seen of vineyards – perhaps in California, perhaps in France or Italy, or even in Israel. I have yet to see a singular plant growing alone. The vineyard consists of multiple plants, planted together, cultivated together, growing together, linked together, producing fruit together. We’ve heard it said over the past many months that “We’re all in this together.” This is true. This is fundamentally true. It goes to the heart of who we are – “we” 1st person plural. Plural.

There is an African term – it is “ubuntu” and it means “Because we are, I am.” Let me say that again – “Because we are, I am.” Because of y’all, we are. What makes us a “we” – 1st person plural? We are a “we” because of God’s good gift to us of baptismal waters, waters in which we are washed and claimed and marked with the sign of the cross of Christ forever and brought into our life together as followers of Jesus.

And “we” gather together, serve together, love one another, come to the Table, and leave to serve.

Thanks be to God

