

Vines and Branches

What if we really take Jesus at his word: that God is the vine and we are the branches?

I mean, *really* take Jesus at his word?

Not how we usually do it:

"Oh that Jesus! There he goes again! Another cute metaphor for us to nod appreciatively at."

But what if we, as Jesus undoubtedly did, really take it at face value?

Vines and branches, any farmer will tell you, are made of the same plant.

They are different aspects of exactly the same reality.

Branches are infused with exactly that which infuses the vine.

The mystics have always insisted that we and God are one.

That we, in our spiritual development -- which is all about letting go rather than climbing higher -- become God; just as surely as God comes to live in us.

Sound kind of new agey to you?

Listen to what that great mystic, Meister Eckhart, said some 600 years ago:

"The knower and the known are one. Simple people imagine that they should see God as if he stood there and they here. This is not so. God and I, we are one in knowledge."

So what, you say?

More spiritual rigmarole.

Makes no difference in my life!

Unless we go deeper.

If we really are part and parcel of God, what are we afraid of?

Lord knows, we're afraid of all kinds of things.

Running out of money; losing those we love; forsaking a reputation built over years; the list of fears is endless.

But if you, in your essence, are made of the same substance as God; I ask again, what is there to fear?

Still sound new agey?

Listen to Genesis:

"And God created humanity, male and female he created them, in God's image he created them."

"Image" means "likeness;" it means "reflection."

We so often cling to trying to control people, places and things, I think, precisely because we forget to remember in whose image we are made.

Left to ourselves in this large, frightening world, you better learn how to control people, places and things.

Because the operating assumption is that we really are alone in

this world, and will only get what we can grab.

But change the operating assumption.

Try on what Jesus is telling us today; that root and branch, God is in us and we are in God.

Take that, and then take a deep breath, and let go!

What comes from letting go is not falling into the abyss, but a new kind of freedom.

A freedom that transports Phillip far from home encountering a man as foreign as foreign can be, yet welcoming him into the family of God, with no preconditions, no reservations.

This kind of freedom has never been easy to swallow.

There's a verse in today's lesson from Acts, verse 37, that is not included in most bibles because everyone agrees it was added later by a nameless monk who couldn't stand the freedom that oozes out of Philips encounter with the eunuch.

That nameless monk decided that he just had to add this to Luke's original story:

"And Philip said, 'If you believe with all your heart, you may (be baptized).' And the eunuch answered and said, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.'"

But that's not how Luke wrote it.

There was no oath to sign, no class to attend, no restriction imposed before this foreign foreigner is baptized into the church.

That's the freedom we are called to.

We are called to it in our private lives; for this is the freedom that comes as soon as we learn to let go of control over people, places and things.

We are called to this freedom even more broadly, in our lives in the world, for this is the freedom that allows us to stand in resolute opposition to the dominant culture: a culture rooted in competition and striving and power and violence and looking out for number one: none of which is consistent with the life we are called to as followers of Jesus.

It is *this spirit* that takes the church by the hand and says:

“Be my witness!”

“Be ready to be taken up and plopped down where ever the need is!”

“Be ready *to fly!*”

A famous preacher and teacher was giving his class at a well known seminary.

At one point, it seems he went off the rails, or was babbling or maybe just trying to see if anyone was actually listening to what he was saying.

Here is what he said:

“The other day, I saw a nine pound sparrow in front of my house, walking down the street.

So I asked the sparrow, “Aren’t you a little heavy?”

The sparrow said:

"Yeah, that's why I'm out walking, trying to get some of this weight off."

And I said: "Why don't you fly?"

The sparrow looked at me like I was stupid and said:

"Fly? I've never flown. I could get hurt!"

I said: "What's your name?"

And he said: "Church."

Myer, *The Underground Church*, 190-91.

Jesus didn't live and die, and the finger of God did not raise him from the dead, so that his church could become a nine-pound sparrow that waddles instead of flies!

And what about the love that St. John so beautifully sings about?

That's what lets us fly!

Because love *doesn't start* with us!

Nothing starts with us --contrary to the greatly mistaken popular notion that *everything* begins with us.

No!

It *all* begins with God, and it all *ends* with God.

So my dear friends, you fellow branches, some growing strong and sure from the vine, others wondering about strength and sureness, no matter where you are, take up the challenge of that other apostle, his name is Paul, who urges this, and nothing more:

"*Do not be conformed to this world* but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God -- what is *good* and *acceptable* and *perfect*."

Rom 12:2

+amen