

Easter 6B 2021 Sermon

John 15: 9-17 As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

It doesn't take much reading of the Bible to discover that it is filled with metaphors, similes, and images! In the Old Testament, **God** is sometimes said to be a singer or a composer (Zephaniah 3:17, Deuteronomy 31:19), a house or a housebuilder (1 Chronicles 17:10b, Psalm 90:1), a spring of water (Jeremiah 2:13), a potter (Isaiah 64:8), a shepherd (Psalm 23), or a woman in labor (Isaiah 42:14). **Jesus** uses all *sorts* of similes in his attempts to describe the *Kingdom* of God. The Kingdom of God is like... a mustard seed, or yeast mixed with flour, treasure hidden in a field, a pearl of great price, a net cast into the sea, a sower casting seeds which fall on all kinds of soil. In *last week's* Gospel, Jesus metaphorically said, "I am the vine, you are the branches." And we could go on and on! "All language about God is necessarily symbolic and figurative," writes Richard Rohr. "...*Words* are never the thing itself; they can only point toward the thing..."¹

Now, if you're like me, when you come upon all of these images in the Bible – God is a singer or a shepherd or a woman in labor; Jesus is the True vine and we are the branches – when we encounter these images and metaphors, we try to make sense of them by turning them over in our minds. "God is a potter and we are the clay. That reminds me that God created me and formed me from the beginning. And I need to be grateful to God for creating me." "The kingdom of heaven is like a sower who sowed seeds on rocky soil, shallow soil, hard soil, and good soil. This means I should strive to be good soil in which the Word of God can grow." The metaphors and similes in the Bible help our minds understand truths about God and how we are supposed to relate to God and to one another. And that can be very helpful.

But often, at least for me, that's where the function of the metaphors stops. They give us intellectual insight and understanding regarding who God is, and they help teach us how **we** are supposed to act toward each other.

But there is *another* level at which metaphors in the Bible can function. Yes, they can enlighten our minds; but they can also affect us at the level of our souls, our emotions, our experiences, our very being. And *often*, God, Christ, the Holy Spirit come to us even *more* powerfully through these **other** portals of entry than they come to us through the portal of our mind.

Perhaps one of the most relatable examples is the 23rd Psalm. For, who among us is not comforted, reassured, and made to feel safe at a deep level of our being when we hear the psalmist declare, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want... He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul... Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me”? If we *open* our selves and become *receptive* at the level of our being, the *same* thing can happen when we hear **Jesus** say, as we heard a few weeks ago, “I am the Good Shepherd... I know my own and my own know me... And I lay down my life for the sheep.” (John 10:11-15) My friends, Bible passages like this are not meant to be simply processed with our minds, but **felt** in the depths of our beings.

In *last* week’s Gospel, Jesus said, “I am the true vine, my Father is the vinegrower, and you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit. Apart from me, you can do nothing.” (John 15:1-5) Now, I had always processed – and preached! – that passage rationally. “When we cut ourselves off from God, we will only produce the fruit of our egos,” I would typically preach. But last week, I was sent a poem about that Bible passage, which totally changed the way I now see it and relate to it. Meditating on the image of Jesus as the true vine and we as the branches, the poet asks,

How might it **feel** to be part of the vine?
 Not just to see the vineyard from afar
 Or even pluck the clusters, press the wine,
 But to be grafted in, to feel the stir
 Of inward sap that rises from our root,
 Himself deep planted in the ground of Love...
 To bear within oneself the joy and hope
 Of God’s good vintage, till it’s ripe and whole.
 What might it mean to bide and to abide
 In such rich love as makes the poor heart glad?²

And suddenly, that passage comes **alive** for me! I sense what I would *feel* if I were a branch drawing life-giving sap from a strong, nourishing vine planted deep in the ground of Love, and I **know** – not in my mind, but in my *being* – I **know** what it means to draw my life from God, without whom I could do nothing!

Can you not **feel** it? When you process the metaphor, not with your mind, but in the depths of your being? I invite you, right now, to close your eyes for a minute,

and **become** that branch drawing your life from the vine. How does it *feel* to be part of the Christ-vine?

(You can now open your eyes.)

In *today's* Gospel, Jesus says to his disciples (and to us), "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love."

It's a formula that Jesus uses throughout John's Gospel: "As the father has... so I have... and so you should..." John Shea writes, "[T]here is a higher order of things, and... human well-being depends on people aligning themselves with that order."³ (Repeat)

But the image of "alignment" is a static image, and the love of God about which our Gospel speaks is dynamic and *alive*! So, rather than "alignment," I would like to offer another image: the image of *resonance*. When our hearts are in alignment with God, when they are "tuned" to the frequency of God's love, they resonate with that love.

If we have two violins here in this room, and if the second violin is in tune with the first, then if you play the "A" string on the first violin, and then put your hand over the strings so the sound is silenced, you will still hear the sound of the note "A" coming from the second violin (albeit much softer), even though you haven't touched the second violin. It's called "sympathetic resonance." The string on the first violin vibrates, and that, in turn, gives **energy** to the same string on the second violin, so that it, too, *vibrates*, in resonance with the first. "We love because God first loved us," the 1st Letter of John states. God is the **source** of Love, and *we* can only love in sympathetic resonance with **God's** love. "If you keep my commandments," Jesus says in today's Gospel, "you will abide in my love. You will *resonate* with my love." We might see Jesus' commandments as "instructions for how to keep ourselves tuned" to the vibrational frequency of Divine Love, and how to keep our heartstrings free to vibrate and resonate. And then, the vibrations of **our** heart-strings can, in turn, cause the tuned heartstrings of *others* to vibrate, also, thus sharing God's Love-song with others; loving one another. Our final hymn today uses this very image: "Come, thou fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing thy grace!"⁴

But the Divine Resonance is even more *expansive* than that! In our first hymn today, we heard, "This is my Father's world, and to my listening (receptive) ears *all nature sings* and round me rings *the music of the spheres!*"⁵ And, have you not experienced it? Those times when you are out in nature, out in our Father's world, and your heartstrings are tuned and open, and you can feel your own heart resonating to the frequency of Creation?

My friends, the fact that you and I were created in the image of God means that we were *born* with our heart-strings tuned to resonate with the vibrations of God's Love-song. We only get *out*-of-tune when we allow our heart-strings to be re-tuned to the world's siren songs of wealth, superiority, prejudice, judgment, divisiveness, selfishness, identity politics, ego – you know the seductive tunes as well as I do.

Prayer is the receptive and humble process of letting God “[re]-tune our hearts to sing his grace,” so that we might, once again, resonate with the music of the spheres. Richard Rohr notes that “Without [prayer and] contemplation, the best you can do is to know by comparison, calculation, and from the limited viewpoint of ‘you.’ Prayer knows reality in a totally different way.”⁶ Knowing – not by comparison or calculation – but by resonating, at the very depths of our being, with the vibrations of God's Love-song. Can you not **feel** that resonating love-energy, deep within you, when your heart is tuned to sing God's grace?

AMEN

¹ Richard Rohr's Daily email Meditation, January 11, 2017

² Malcolm Guite, “[I Am the Vine](#)” used with permission, from *Parable and Paradox: Sonnets on the sayings of Jesus and other poems*, Canterbury Press, 2016 Kindle version [4417071-i-am-the-vine.mp3](#)

³ John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, p. 132

⁴ “Come, thou fount of every blessing,” Robert Robinson (1735-1790), *Hymnal 1982* #686

⁵ “This is my Father's World,” Maltbie D. Babcock (1858-1901)

⁶ Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation, “A Tuning Fork,” Friday, June 30, 2017