

Easter 6, Year B 2024

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Love is the Answer

Last week in John's Gospel Jesus described himself as the vine that is planted by the divine gardener, and that his disciples (and ultimately we who follow Jesus) are the branches. The branches reach out, they collect sun that feeds the vine, they grow fruit that feeds the world.

But Jesus wasn't done with his explanation when we finished our Gospel last week. This week, he's still talking, explaining what this relationship between vine and branches is all about. The short answer is it's all about love, as our presiding bishop would say.

What is this vine made of? Love. What are we grafted into and growing out of? Love. What is the Father's Commandment to Jesus and Jesus' commandment to his followers? To Love.

Love is the Answer....

But it's not just any kind of love – it's the kind of love that invests its life in the thriving and the blossoming of others. It the kind of love that lays down its life for the benefit of the beloved. And it's also the kind of love that messes with things – especially when systems need to change in order for people to thrive. Which makes it the kind of love that gets in trouble – Good Trouble, as the late John Lewis would say.

God loved the world in that way by joining our human life as Jesus. God laid down the divine life right among God's creation and joined that life to ours -- as Jesus who suffered, died and rose again. As Word and story that rings in our ears. As bread and wine shared at table. As vine that feeds the world on love.

That's the friend we have in Jesus.

Now of course words like friends and love can mean different things, given how they are used or misused today. We're not talking about Facebook friends here, or old pals, or even the folks we like best in the world or sit with after church. We are talking about the lives that we want to see grow into something good and beautiful and lifegiving, lives that in turn bless and feed others.

That is God's vision for all the world's people, that's how far the vine reaches. And God has chosen us to participate in that work. Now you might have thought that you hunted around, read several books, or visited several churches, or tried out a variety of belief systems before you chose this branch of the Jesus movement to spend your Sunday mornings. But Jesus insists in today's Gospel that he chose you. Grew you, in fact, right out

of the vine in a particular place, with a particular reach and gifts for a particular set of hungry people. That's why there are so many branches. It's a big world that Jesus has befriended.

We are called to love the folks at hand, which is probably a lot more people than are on your Facebook friend list, or that you even know personally. But they are within the reach of our branches – that's why God put us where we are.

There is no greater love than to lay down your life for a friend, Jesus says right before that life is demanded of him and laid down for us. But I don't think this is just talking about being willing to die for people, though that would happen to most of those disciples. NT Wright in his commentary on John points out this kind of logic has sent a lot of people to war, believing that their greatest gift was to be ready to die in mass conflict rather than to question whether that level of violence could ever be an avenue for love the way Jesus expressed it.

Still, the love that Jesus is describing here does have a cost to it. There is a lot one must let go of or lay down to practice this kind of love – one's dominance, or privilege, one's arrogance and self-service, one's agendas and appetites and hungers. This kind of love doesn't seek to possess people or collect them, but to free them, to see them thrive.

That's the love that characterizes a friend of Jesus. It is measured by joy -- the joy you feel when another person blossoms, when you get to have a little part in their becoming who they are absolutely meant to be. Have you ever felt that joy? For me, that's Sunday joy. to participate in that much love, and to add to it in some way.

We often attribute that kind of love to saints, and super-heroes like Martin Luther King or Mother Theresa or Desmond Tutu. Indeed, they can teach us a lot about how to be friends of God.

And sometimes the ones who model the cost of transformative love are everyday people. Sometimes the cry for love and justice and peace gets so urgent it starts to echo through the streets, and we have to run to catch up to it.

I'm thinking of 2,000 students across the country who have been arrested because their call for justice for Palestinians crushed in the war between Israel and Hamas was too disruptive to college lawns, and end-of-year schedules, and university policies. Ending this war and creating a sustainable and just peace for all who live in the Holy Land is something that the Pope and the Episcopal Presiding Bishop and the Archbishop of Canterbury, among others, have advocated. But those students have put that message in a place where it can't be scrolled over or ducked under. And there's a cost.

I'm remembering that this weekend is the 54th anniversary of May 4th, 1970s when the Ohio National Guard killed four and injured nine students protesting the Vietnam War at Kent State University, my alma mater. At the end of the month, it will be four years since protest over the death of George Floyd changed our conversation on racism and policing.

Arrest, suspension, expulsion, physical harm, even death – those have long been the costs to those who disrupt violence, cry out for peace and inconvenience business as usual in the process.

When Jesus assured his followers that he was the vine, they were the branches, and love is the answer, he was telling them to buckle up. If you keep reading in the 15th Chapter of John, this is what Jesus says next:

“If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.”

The world hasn't changed much since then in its capacity to reject the divine love that is on offer, especially when that love challenges oppression, violence, wealth and power.

In 1946 in an essay called [“Love is the Measure”](#) Dorothy Day lists the issues that her Catholic Worker Community was actively concerned about at the time – atom bomb tests, a maritime strike that would limit global food shipments, bread shortages and housing shortages, a draft that would send younger and younger people to war. In light of all that work, she wrote: “We face the situation that there is nothing we can do for people but to love them.

“...We continue in our fourteenth year of feeding our brother and clothing him and sheltering him, and the more we do it the more we realize that the most important thing is to love,” writes Day, a woman who called her fellow Catholics to repeat such acts of love over and over again, the way one would repeat the Hail Mary's on a rosary.

This dear hero of mine reminds me that in every generation, since those first disciples gathered in the upper room, those who would abide in Christ's love would be up against those who would resist its world-changing qualities. And that those branches of the Jesus movement would keep loving anyway, no matter how foolish it seemed.

“What we would like to do is change the world—make it a little simpler for people to feed, clothe and shelter themselves as God intended them to do,” Day wrote. “And to a certain extent, by fighting for better conditions, by crying out unceasingly for the rights of the workers, of the poor, of the destitute—the rights of the worthy and the unworthy poor in other words, we can to a certain extent change the world; we can work for the oasis, the

little cell of joy and peace in a harried world. We can throw our pebble in the pond and be confident that its ever-widening circle will reach around the world. We can give away an onion.”

“We repeat, there is nothing that we can do but love, and dear God—please enlarge our hearts to love each other, to love our neighbor, to love our enemy as well as our friend.”

That is her prayer, and my prayer and Jesus’ prayer. And all it needs is an Amen.