

ENCIRCLED IN LOVE

A sermon in the series
God is Still Speaking in the Symbols of Our Sanctuary

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Text: John 15:1-13 (at end of sermon)

It's August 30th already, nearly the end of summer. If you have a garden, your vegetables should be ripening and it's the time of year when things start going to seed. Today our summer sermon series goes to seed.

A few weeks ago, I asked you to look up at the architecture of the sanctuary, here in the nave, and to imagine that we are in a great, big upside down boat. I'm going to ask you to look up again today, but I want you to put your imagination to work in a different direction. Get that boat out of your mind, because we don't want to mix our metaphors. Imagine instead that we are in a great pergola. You know what a pergola is? It's wooden structure, like an arbor, that grape vines are trained to grow over. If you've been in that little side theatre at the Music Box, that's a pergola. You see them especially in Italian vineyards. This sanctuary was designed like a pergola.

We are surrounded by grapevines when we walk through the door. Encircling the sanctuary at the top of the columns is a vine. There are vines running from column to column over the width of the sanctuary. If you look closely, you can see that there are two parallel grape vines running the whole length of the ceiling. There is another one running the entire length of the edge of the balcony. And running up the columns at the entrance to the chancel, a grapevine, with big clusters of ripe grapes carved into the stone. Imagine if these vines came to life out of the stone and green leaves and clusters of grapes were hanging over us and around us. Can you see it? Wouldn't it be great if we were worshipping together right now under a pergola in a vineyard in Tuscany? But these grapes aren't Italian. Germans built this sanctuary, so our grapes are undoubtedly all Riesling or Gewurztraminer.

This symbol of the vine comes right out of John 15. Jesus tells his disciples, "I am the vine, my father is the vinegrower, and you are the branches. Abide in me, abide in my love, and love one another so that you might bear much fruit." That pretty much sums up John 15. I want to look between the vine leaves, peel a few grapes, and tease out some of the meaning that this metaphor has for our lives and our life together as St. Pauls Church. It is a rich metaphor, and I'm sure you could add much to it with your own imaginations.

We sometimes sing the hymn "Bring Many Names." It speaks of God being a father and a mother and other different ways that scripture talks about God's relationship to us. John 15

contains another name for God that you can add to your list - George. Jesus says, "I am the vine and my father is the vinegrower." Now that word vinegrower in Greek, which the book of John was originally written in, is the word georgos. It's where we get the name George or Georgia from. It simply means farmer in Greek. Jesus says, "I am the vine and my father is a farmer - George." I love that.

What a great way to think about God's relationship to us - as a farmer, our farmer - planting, tending, cultivating, pruning, nurturing, waiting. Farmers are patient. They wait for their crops to produce. They don't do everything at once. They can't. Farmers have to take their time and wait. God waits for us. Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. Every branch that bears fruit Farmer God prunes to make us even more fruitful.

At our old house I used to grow tomatoes, most of which were stolen by a gang in our neighborhood, a gang of evil squirrels. It would be the end of summer, when the tomatoes are ripening at their peak. And I'd be leaving a tomato on the vine, just waiting for the right moment to pick. I knew I was risking a squirrel attack, but you know how you want it to be just right? And I'd come out onto the back deck in the morning, and there would be sitting, on a step, my ripe tomato with one big squirrel bite taken out of it. I swear they did that on purpose to taunt me. Part of being a farmer is protecting your crop from pests, knowing when to prune and pick the fruit. I did a lousy job of protecting my tomatoes.

We no longer have a backyard, just a balcony, where we have been growing some herbs this summer, and we planted a pot of basil. But you've got to watch basil. This time of year it becomes full and bushy and it's doing everything that it possibly can to bloom and go to seed, producing its fruit. It has this strong inner urge to go to seed. That's what plants do. That's their purpose in life, to bloom and produce fruit. So you have to stay on top of the basil, pruning it back, deadheading the places where blossoms are forming so it doesn't go to seed too early, and so it keeps producing all of those wonderfully fragrant, spicy, clovey leaves to mix with olive oil and pour over your fresh tomatoes, which you'd have if the squirrels didn't get to them first.

That is how farmer George God works with us. That's part of the meaning of these vines. God keeps pruning our lives so that we will produce more fruit. It's not always pleasant, and this is really the word of judgment in this scripture, but if you're like me, you need to be pruned. There is stuff in our lives that we've got to get rid off, junk that has built up over time and that gets in the way of our lives flourishing.

Like basil, our purpose in life is to produce fruit - goodness beyond ourselves. Our purpose is to flourish. Remember one of the first stories in the Bible? We hear a story about a garden - Eden, paradise - and humans are put in the garden to take care of it. It's a story about our lives. We are meant to be fruitful, living in close relationship with God, in close relationship with each

other. But something has gone terribly wrong in our garden, and we've grown distant from God and distant from each other.

Joe is in Hawaii right now on "business." No, really, he is. And when I was talking to him on the phone he mentioned that he had had a couple of unpleasant encounters with some folks over there and he said, "They call this paradise, but the paradise must be in the flowers and birds and beaches because I haven't been finding it so much in the people." Paradise isn't in the people. That's the story of Eden, isn't it? That's the story of our lives no matter where we live. Our relationships are fractured, relationships between individuals and all the way up to relationships between nations. Something is terribly wrong with our world. We were never meant to be alienated from each other and from creation the way we are, but paradise is not in the people.

At the beginning of the book of John, Jesus is described as being present at the very beginning of creation. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. All things came into being through him. Without him nothing was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of all people." John speaks of Jesus as being present at the very beginning, when the garden of paradise was first planted. And now the one who was there at the beginning calls us into a new creation, a new garden, this vine running around us, to put paradise back into the people. Putting paradise back into us means restoring our broken relationships with God and with each other and restoring our relationship with all of creation around us. That's another meaning in these vines and branches. Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Abide in my love. Abide in my love and you will bear much fruit. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

Living connected to the vine has to do with love. And Jesus commands us to love. What do you make of that? Can you be commanded to love? We talk about falling in love, being love-struck. "I just fell for him; I fell for her. I couldn't help it. It just happened. We fell in love." That's how we talk about love, isn't it? But Jesus commands us to love.

He seems to be saying that love is a choice. Love involves an act of the will. It means that the person you can't stand, the one who rubs you the wrong way, that person that you have no natural inclination to even like, you must somehow choose to love. What do you think about that? How can we be commanded to love, and if that's what Jesus commands, what's keeping us from doing it? What keeps you from loving?

I've been quoting a familiar passage from scripture in my sermons pretty frequently over the past year or so, mostly because I need to hear these words; and when you see the way Christians get caught up in the fights and meanness and pettiness of this world, I think we all need to hear these words again and again. This is how Paul talks about love in 1 Corinthians 13. You've heard it before, hear it again. Pause after each phrase; think about it slowly; let love go to work in you:

"Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; love is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but

rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

Noble, beautiful words that Paul wrote. They hit me right between the eyes every time. But you notice something; love is not about warm, fuzzy feelings. Love seems to have little to do with emotion. Love is about how we live out our daily lives. Love is about our attitudes, how we treat one another. Love is about how you do your job on Monday morning and how you relate to our coworkers. Love is about how we post our anonymous opinions in on-line forums. Love is about how we treat and talk about people with whom we disagree, strongly disagree, even how we talk about them behind their backs, maybe especially there. Love is even about how we treat our enemies. Jesus said that love is the one identifying mark of how people will know that we are his disciples.

“I am the vine and my father is the vinegrower. Ever branch in me that does not bear fruit is removed; every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it more fruitful.” What needs to be pruned from your life to help you love like that? What junk needs to go? Bitterness you’re holding onto? A grudge you’re carrying? Prejudice? Is it my own self-importance or self-centeredness? Materialism and consumerism that preoccupies me and distracts me? Is it fear? What is keeping your life from flourishing in love? What needs to be pruned away?

Jesus commands us to love, but it’s an impossible command to keep on our own. He said, “Abide in *my* love. Abide in *my* love and you will bear much fruit.” What does it mean to abide? How do you abide in someone’s love? You remember it. You’re conscious of it. You depend on it. You live in it. You wake up with it in the morning and you go to bed with it at night. God’s love is the very sap that is flowing through the vine.

As you go about your daily life, what is the primary way that you tend to think about God relating to you? Is God distant? Is God close-by? Is God judgmental? Is God a divine police officer? If you could put whatever way that you think about God into something that God would say to you, what would it be? What would God say to you? I’ve had various images of God over the years, and here are some things I’ve heard those images saying to me. Perhaps you can relate: “You’re a big disappointment.” “I’m mad at you.” “I’ve forgotten you.” “You’re just not good enough.” What would your image of God say to you?

The image of God that is found in all of the vines growing around us in this great pergola of a sanctuary is speaking. It’s saying something to us, and what it’s saying is: “I love you. You are encircled in my love. You are utterly surrounded by my love. Remain in my love. Abide in my love. Hold onto it. Live in it. Let my love get inside of you to heal you and change you, to transform your relationships and the whole way that you live. Let me put paradise inside of you.”

That’s what I believe these vines and branches and clusters of grapes mean. We are encircled, covered, surrounded and connected to each other in love, like kudzu vines. Have you seen kudzu

when you've driven around in the south? It grows over everything – bushes, trees, rocks, houses, nothing gets in the way of kudzu. It covers everything. God's love covers everything, like kudzu vines growing along a highway in Georgia. There's that name again. Farmer Georgia. We worship in a vineyard under a giant pergola, you and me; Jesus is the vine, we are the branches, and this vineyard belongs to God.

John 15:1-13

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches.

Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

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.