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Our Saviour/St. Stephen
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Easter 5

Sisters and brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, you may remember last week we talked about sheep and shepherds.

Indeed, last week, Jesus had announced, "I am the good shepherd."

This week we are talking about vines and branches.

This week Jesus says, "I am the true vine."

And, when we think about Jesus' teachings, we have to note that Jesus uses a lot of imagery from the natural world.

Sheep and shepherds.

Vines and branches.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus also talks about how the birds of the air neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.

And Jesus talks about the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, and yet they are clothed in glory.

Sometimes I imagine Jesus as the Son of God just quietly sitting in nature, watching, watching all that is going on around himself.

Sometimes I imagine Jesus just observing the natural world, making mental notes, so as to use what he observes as examples for how he will teach us how we are to live our lives.

Yes, there is something of a poet in Jesus.

For this is what poets do.

They sit and observe and then they attempt to capture in words what it is they see and hear and feel going on around them.

Poets capture a snapshot of life in words.

And this...this is what Jesus does.

And like a good poet, Jesus crafts his words in such a way that Jesus brings us into the experience.

Poets do this as well, at least any poet that is worth their title as poet.

Poets bring us into the experience they are describing.

Poets make us feel what they are feeling.

Poets make us see and hear what they are seeing and hearing.

And the poet Jesus brings us into the experience, too.

Think about Jesus describing the sheep and the good shepherd.

In that image, Jesus brings us into the experience, such that we become the sheep of his pasture.

And think about the description of the birds of the air, and the lilies of the field.

Jesus brings us into the experience, such that we see these living things, and recognize, that yes, they are cared for, such that they simply go about being and doing what they do—without worry.

And so, we are to be and do what we do, simply going about our lives, knowing that God sees our needs as well.

BECAUSE we, too, are in God's creation.

We aren't outside observers looking in on creation.

No, we are part of God's creation, like the birds, the lilies, and the sheep, and so, we are recipients of God's care, too.

PAUSE

That I think is part of the wonder of Jesus' teaching using examples of the natural world.

And so there is not just something of a poet in Jesus, there is also something of the Native American in Jesus.

In that Jesus connects us to the natural world.

Now, the Native American sees the natural world as infused with different spirits—the spirit in a tree, or the spirit in an animal, etc.

But interestingly enough, Jesus connects us to the natural world, by relating us and himself to the natural world by way of metaphors.

We see that most especially in our reading today, where Jesus says, “I am the true vine,” and where he says “we are the branches.”

And again, we can just imagine Jesus sitting on a warm, sunny hill underneath the shade of a tree, looking at a vineyard.

And we can just imagine Jesus looking at those grapevines in that vineyard.

And we can imagine Jesus thinking to himself, “Those branches need to be attached to that main vine. If not, they will wither and die.”

And we can imagine Jesus thinking to himself, “Those grape clusters would shrivel and die, if not for the main vine drawing up water, and those branches providing a conduit for that water.”

We can just imagine Jesus sitting there taking all this in and then thinking, “This is a perfect example of the relationship between the disciples and myself.”

We can just imagine all this taking place in the mind of Jesus.

It is poetry. It is beautiful language that captures what the Christian life is about.

But, what is the goal? What is the endgame?
What is meant to be achieved with this poetry?

Simply put the goal of a grapevine is to produce fruit.

That is its purpose. That is its reason for being.

A grapevine exists to produce fruit.

Fruit that is taken in and eaten by creatures, like human beings, but other creatures too in nature.

That is the grapevine's sole purpose—to make grapes.

But, the fruit, the grapes, of course, contain seed within them.

And it is hoped then that those seeds are carried by the creatures that harvest them and ingest them, so that the seeds are transported and dropped elsewhere in the soil to produce more grapevines.

Thus, the real goal of a grapevine is to propagate.

To make more grapevines in other locations.

All this is spelled out in the Bible.

All this is spelled out in the story of Creation.

On the third day of Creation, God had said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with seed in it."

And although God doesn't say as much, it is certainly implied, that the command from God to the plants yielding seed is this: "Be fruitful and multiply."

Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.

That is what plants do.

They propagate. They promulgate.

They disseminate, they spread their seed and so then they range far and wide upon the landscape.

PAUSE

Human beings are not so different really.

We propagate, and we multiply and we fill the earth.

We range far and wide upon the landscape.

But, it is not just that we are to make more of ourselves.

We are also to produce fruit, which is more than just babies.

So then, what is the fruit we are to produce?

PAUSE

Well, this section in John's gospel actually culminates at verse 12, which we didn't read as part of our Gospel passage.

But verse 12 says, these are Jesus' words: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

"That you love one another as I have loved you."

It is interesting that Jesus commands us to show love to one another, almost as though we are commanded like the plants and animals are commanded in the Creation story to bear fruit and multiply.

We are commanded like the natural order is created to do what it does in nature.

Plants and animals bear fruit and they propagate, because they are commanded to do so.

They are almost unable to do otherwise. It is the very essence of their being-ness.

This command from Jesus, as it relates to the grapevine, is then to be the very essence of our being-ness.

We are to bear fruit, which is to have love for one another.

Human beings are not made to make money.

Human beings are not made to have successful careers.

Human beings are not made to accumulate wealth and status, and power, and prestige, and greatness.

If those things come with the living out of our lives, so be it.

But the wealth, money, power, prestige, greatness, successful careers, and all of that...

All of that serves the ultimate purpose of why we exist at all as human beings, and that is to bear fruit in the form showing love to one another.

PAUSE

The apostle Paul says this quite well in that famous passage from I Corinthians 13, which is all about love.

He says, “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong, or a clanging symbol.”

“And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.”

“If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.”

In other words, we may do great things in the world.

We may become persons of influence, persons who hold positions of power and authority.

We may rise in stature, become famous, envied by others.

We may do and become all these things.

But, if we lack the capacity to love, if love does not motivate our actions, then we are nothing. We are nothing but a noisemaker—a noisy gong or clanging symbol.

If we have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if we have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, we are nothing.

This is Paul’s take on our Gospel reading.

We human beings are made to bear fruit in the form of love for one another.

And to fail to do so, is to fail to be what we have been created to be.

Which is why Jesus says such fruitless branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

A rather gloomy thought, mind you.

On the other hand, those branches that do bear fruit are pruned, so that they can bear more fruit.

But I have no idea what that means.

I have no idea of what it means to be “pruned.”

Except that I imagine it means to be acknowledged, thanked, and congratulated on showing love.

Because whenever we are acknowledged, thanked, and congratulated on doing anything well, we are more inclined to continue to do that some thing, in this case, showing love to one another.

So, that is my best guess on what it means to be pruned so as to bear more fruit.

PAUSE

Finally, I want to us to note something at the end of this Gospel reading, and that is this.

We glorify God by bearing fruit and showing love to one another.

We glorify God...We lift up God...Or maybe the best way to say it is that we express God’s goodness in the world for others to see, when we show love to one another.

Even if we aren’t defining it as such, even if we are proclaiming “God” in so many words, if we simply show love to one another, then God’s goodness is revealed in the world, which goes a long way to counter the negativity in the world, the cynicism in the world, and the ugliness in the world.

To show love to one another may make others have just a little bit of restored hope for the world.

But again, for us, to show love to one another glorifies God.

So, there you have it. The poetry of Jesus, the language of our Lord whereby Jesus takes what he observes in the natural world and applies it to what we are to be in the world—fruit-bearers of God’s love.

Thanks be to God. Amen.