



Westminster Presbyterian Church Knoxville, TN
 November 10, 2024
 The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
 Sermon: “The Vine and the Gap”

John 15:1-17 (NRSV)

1 “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. 2 He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. 3 You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.

4 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. 5 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. 6 Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

8 My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. 9 As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 10 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. 11 I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

12 “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command you.

15 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. 16 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. 17 I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

“The Vine and the Gap”

Most evenings, I walk our dog across the unlit portion of Ebenezer Road between our neighborhood and the next. Our house sits along a single street that dead-ends in a cul-de-sac, and the dog much prefers the winding streets of the larger neighborhood beside us.

The problem is at night, the sidewalk connecting the two is almost invisible in the darkness. It's not just the absence of streetlights. It's that this section of Ebenezer Road is at the top of a steep hill, which immediately drops off on either side, so the oncoming traffic lights blind me, but fail to illuminate the sidewalk below.

On a dark night, it's like walking out in the expanse of outer space. I can't even see my own feet, much less where I am putting my feet, while the traffic lights blind us as they zoom past.

The dog doesn't seem to mind, but she's a terrible guide. She just wanders from one end of the sidewalk to the next, directed more by her nose than her eyes. You see, on either side of the sidewalk is grass, a narrow strip that borders the street and then a much larger band on the other side that ends in some trees. She moves between the two, walking in front of me, offering no indication of where the sidewalk begins or ends, much less worried than I am about the oncoming cars, speeding by just a few feet from us.

Why don't you bring a flashlight, you might ask? My spouse asks me the same thing. Despite my complaints, it seems unnecessary.

In the total blackness of night, walking without sight, I can still tell where I am, just so long as I can feel the concrete beneath my feet. As long as I'm hitting the hard sidewalk with my steps, rather than the soft grass, I know that I'm on the path, that we are safe.

I am the vine; you are the branches, Jesus tells his disciples, in the 15th chapter of the Gospel of John. I want you to ponder with me today, the image of the vine, not so much as a plant with grapes growing from it, but instead, the vine as a tether, or a lifeline, or even as a path, connecting us to the very heart of God.

This week, I have been thinking a lot of my blind, late-night walks, and the vine as a lifeline, connecting us to the very heart of God. Because, let's face it, this last week felt like we were all stepping out into the dark:

No matter where you stand on the political spectrum, we can now acknowledge this election season as one of the most divisive national events of recent memory. It brought out the worst in us:

- suspicion of one another;
- dehumanizing rhetoric against minorities, immigrants, and women;
- threats of authoritarian rule.

It was an election fueled by fear. A lot of that was fear of the other. We must also acknowledge, it is a time when many, many people are afraid they cannot afford their rent, or their mortgage, or their health insurance, or their groceries.

And that type of fear, eats at you.

We are being eaten alive by fear.

So, in the aftermath, it is fair to say that we collectively are in a place of uncertainty, utter confusion, a darkness where you cannot see your feet, much less the path ahead.

What comes next, after a week like that?

Here, Jesus's words to his disciples, step out of scripture and speak to our time and place:

I am the vine, you are the branches.

Remember this famous image comes in what is known as Jesus' farewell discourse in the Gospel of John. These are Jesus's final words before his arrest.

We need to remember this is a moment of utter confusion for the disciples.

Throughout their time, Jesus had told them that he is *the way, the truth, and the life*. They have seen him perform miracles. He literally raised his dead friend Lazarus just a few chapters ago, showing his power over the forces of death, and yet here he is telling his disciples that he will be executed upon a Roman Cross.

In this moment of utter confusion, what does he say to his disciples?

I am the vine, you are the branches...Abide in me as I abide in you.

Jesus goes on to say that the branches will bear fruit, but notice, that is not his emphasis, here. He doesn't say, in the midst of confusion, "You go figure it out;

you do it yourself; it doesn't matter if you don't know where you're going, just get going."

No.

He tells them to *Abide*. Stay attached to him, because the vine is the source of life. And as long as we stay connected to him, the fruit will come:

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

But, what does it mean to abide?

This is my commandment, he says further on, that you love one another as I have loved you.

But does that really answer our question? What, does it mean, after all, to love? Again, Jesus points to himself.

Remember, he tells us, when he faced discrimination and hatred, Jesus stood up for the least, the minority, the unrighteous, the scapegoat.

Remember, when he faced a religious establishment interested only in its own authority and power over others, Jesus, in the opening chapters of Gospel of John, went into the temple, *poured out the coins...and overturned their tables.*

And now, here at the end, face to face with an empire that rules without mercy, Jesus chooses the nonviolent way of resistance: *No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.*

That's what he means, when he tells us to abide:

He tells us to remember, that when he faced the crowds, the institutions, and power players of his time. What did he do? But to love, to love, to show love.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Or as he puts it in the 15th chapter: *Abide in me as I abide in you.*

Parker Palmer says we live our lives in a tragic gap.¹ The tragic gap is not tragic because its ‘sad.’ It’s tragic in the Greek or Shakespearian sense of the term. It is tragic because it is inevitable; it is ‘built into the nature of things.’

We live in a gap, because, on the one hand:

- there is the way we wish the world would be: Our dreams. Our ideals. Everything full of meaning. Everything just. Everything fair. Everything Good.
- And then on the other hand, there is the way things really are: Sad, often disappointing. For the most part: unjust. And unfair.²
- And then here we are in the middle – In Parker Palmer’s tragic gap between our dreams and our reality.

The danger of living in the tragic gap, is the temptation to give up.

The danger, is getting stuck in despair. How many of you felt like you were getting stuck in despair this week?

The other danger, is related. It’s apathy. It’s denial. Or it’s, magical thinking, ‘Well, I’m sure everything will be fine. I’m sure God’s going to take care of it.’

Those two might sound like opposites, despair and magical thinking, but they function in the same way. They remove our responsibility from living and working in the tragic gap, between the way things should be and the way things are.

Parker Palmer himself says that he felt the tragic gap most tangibly in his life when he faced deep, earth-shattering clinical depression, twice in his 40s and then once in his 60s. His therapist, he says, asked him, in the midst of one of these episodes, to keep a journal, of his achievements.

¹ I learned this about Palmer’s work from a recent interview with him on *Everything Happens with Kate Bowler*, “Parker Palmer: Standing in the Gap.” Season 13. Episode 10. <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/standing-in-the-gap/>. Parker explore the tragic gap further in *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

² Here I am paraphrasing Bowler’s introduction to the interview.

‘Achievements?’ he said. ‘What are you crazy? I can barely lift my head off my pillow? Much less write a journal entry about my achievements.’

And the therapist said, ‘Well, you don’t have to write a book. But didn’t you say, that yesterday, you managed to get on your bike, for what, ten minutes? That’s an achievement, write that down. And then tomorrow, maybe you get on it for eleven minutes. And that’s an achievement too.’

Parker said it was the simplest thing. But day by day, stuck in the gap between the way things should be and the way things are, he found he could do these little things. And they brought him out, or they brought him through.

Our job, in the tragic gap, is to keep putting one foot in front of the other. To keep doing the small things, which lead to the big things, to turn this world into a more just and loving place.

This is what Jesus meant, after all, when he said, in a moment, of utter confusion, when he told us to “Abide.”

As you keep putting one foot in front of the other, he says, do it in love. In the gap between the ‘should have been’ and the ‘here we are,’ he calls to do is abide in love.

Little acts of love and resistance, turn into big acts of love and resistance, and by the grace of God, those slowly turn the world’s harsh reality, into the realm of the Kingdom of God.

Why? Because even in the gap, even in the tragic gap...

...there grows a vine:

A Spirit who empowers us to follow a divine way of life.

A way of life that sides with the outcast; and practices the resistance of nonviolence; and abides in the power of love.

In the gap grows a vine.

So, friends, when you find yourself out in the darkness. And you can't see your feet, much less the path ahead of you. Remember the vine. May it be the ground beneath your feet. May it be the way forward.

Abide.

Abide.

Amen.