

CALL TO WORSHIP:

Jesus said, *"I am the vine; you are the branches.*

If you remain in me, and I in you,

you will bear much fruit;

apart from me, you can do nothing."

(John 15.5)

Let us worship God.

HYMN: Now let the vault of heav'n resound

PRAYER OF APPROACH AND CONFESSION:

Holy, righteous, and loving God:

In love, you created us to love; and in the death and resurrection of Jesus, you clearly demonstrated the depths of your love.

Jesus has called us to be his followers, but only by living in relationship with him can we ever begin to live the way of love that he commands. As we worship you today, then, may we be strengthened by the Holy Spirit, so that we may more and more faithfully *live* the faith that we profess.

God of grace: We confess that we fail to live up to the standard of love that you have set for us. We so often act out of self-interest rather than self-giving love. We find it hard to live in your ways because we fail to love you with all our heart, soul, and strength. We mistreat the people around us because we do not love them as we love ourselves.

Have mercy on us, we pray; and forgive both our shortcomings and the things we have actually done wrong. In this time of worship, may we again be inspired by the love you have shown us in Jesus, so that we may produce the fruit of love ever more abundantly in our lives.

We pray in the name of our crucified Savior and risen Lord; and we pray together, now, as he taught us:

THE LORD'S PRAYER

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:

Hear this good news from the scriptures:

This is how God showed his love among us:

he sent his only Son into the world

so that we might live through him.

This is love: not that we have loved God,

but that he loved us,

and sent his Son to be the sacrifice that pays for our sins.

(1 John 4.9-10)

So, if we have confessed our sin to God *sincerely,*

let us be *assured* that God will *forgive* us.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: Open my ears, that I may hear

SCRIPTURE READINGS:

- **First Reading:** Acts 8.26-40 - Philip meets an Ethiopian official

This reading is the story of Philip's encounter with an Ethiopian official, which results in the official's becoming a believer in Jesus.

This Philip is not Philip the apostle, but rather one of the seven men who were recruited to look after low-income members of the church in Jerusalem.

The cities of Gaza, Azotus, and Caesarea, which are mentioned in this passage, were all on Israel's Mediterranean coast.

- **Psalm: Psalm 22.22-31** - "I will declare your name to my people"

Psalm 22 as a whole is a lament — or prayer for help. It's the psalm that begins with the words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Like *most* laments, though, this one contains words of praise also, since the writer anticipates a favorable response from God.

The portion we're reading today comes from this section of praise, at the end of the psalm.

The words about all nations turning to God and all races worshiping him tie in with the reading from Acts that we've just heard.

- **Letter Reading:** 1 John 4.7-21 - "Let us love each other"

In this reading, John urges his readers to love each other, in imitation of God's love for them.

- **Gospel Reading:** John 15.1-17 - "I am the vine"

This reading is part of Jesus' lengthy farewell speech to his disciples on the evening before his death.

It contains one of Jesus' so-called "I am" sayings — "I am the vine".

SERMON:

Now that we're in the second half of the Easter season, the Common Lectionary moves from focusing on stories of appearances of Jesus to his disciples after his resurrection to focusing on portions of the so-called "Supper Discourse" or "Farewell Discourse" in the Gospel of John.

The Supper Discourse is a lengthy speech by Jesus at the supper he shared with his disciples on the evening before his death on the cross. This discourse is found only in the Gospel of John, and, because of it, the supper scene in John is much longer than it is in the other three Gospels. The discourse begins in Chapter 13, and continues to the end of Chapter 16. In it, Jesus seeks to prepare his disciples for his departure — not so much his death, because, of course,

he was raised from death, and was reunited with them; but rather, his eventual ascension, his return to heaven.

In today's Gospel reading, then, Jesus says of himself, "I am the true vine". This is the last of *seven* such sayings in John's Gospel, which include "I am the bread of life" in Chapter 6 and "I am the good shepherd" in Chapter 10, which served as the Gospel reading for last Sunday. These seven sayings are therefore referred to as Jesus' "I am" sayings, and they are unique to the Gospel of John; they're not found in any of the other three Gospels.

In the "I am" sayings, Jesus teaches his listeners about himself, his identity, and the purpose of his ministry by means of simple, straightforward metaphors. They are the closest that he comes to using *parables* in John's Gospel. In this respect, they are one of the ways in which John's Gospel is different from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, in which Jesus often uses parables.

Some of the "I am" sayings are quite brief, such as "I am the light of the world" in Chapter 8, and "I am the way, the truth, and the life" in Chapter 14. Others serve as introductions to speeches, such as "I am the bread of life", "I am the good shepherd", and, in today's reading, "I am the true vine".

In using the metaphor of a vine, Jesus was using an image that the disciples could easily relate to — more easily than we here in Manitoba can, I would guess, since we're not in a grape-growing district. Grapes were a major agricultural product in ancient Israel, and vineyards would've been something that the disciples had seen all over the place in their travels. Grapevines and vineyards are mentioned from time to time in the Old Testament as well; and in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus tells at least as many parables involving vineyards as parables involving sheep.

In today's Gospel reading, then, Jesus speaks about the relationship between himself and his disciples, saying to them, *I am the vine; you are the branches* (John 15.5). He begins, however, by sketching a scenario in which he is the vine and his Father is the gardener or vinegrower who tends the vine. The Father cuts off the branches that don't bear any fruit, and prunes the branches that do bear fruit. As the disciples would've known, the goal of growing grapevines was to produce grapes — as many grapes as possible. A field of leafy grapevines might have been nice to look at, but what grape growers wanted to see, of course, was lots and lots of grapes.

I have to admit that I don't know any more about growing grapes than I do about raising sheep, but the commentaries tell me that grape growers prune their grapevines severely, in order to maximize the number of grapes the vines produce each year. Pruning is therefore a necessary part of the cultivation of grapevines. The other fundamental principle that underlies this saying is that branches can not produce fruit unless they are attached to the vine — which is a truth that's quite obvious. A branch that is separated from a vine — or from a tree, for that matter — can not even survive; it simply dries out and dies.

Getting back to pruning, for a moment, it's interesting that the Greek word that John uses for pruning means "to clean". And when Jesus says to the disciples, *You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you* (John 15.3), John uses a different form of that same Greek word. Presumably, then, Jesus means that the disciples have been "cleaned" or "pruned" by the Father through what Jesus has already taught them.

So then, Jesus is the vine, and his disciples are the branches. What he expects from the disciples, then, is two things: to remain connected to the vine and to produce much fruit. The meaning is quite clear: in order to produce fruit, branches need to remain attached or connected to the vine; so, in order to produce the so-called "fruit" that Jesus is looking for, the disciples need to remain connected to him.

If you read through this passage on your own, you'll notice that Jesus uses the expression "remain in" a great number of times — ten times in the first ten verses, in fact. Some versions translate this expression as "abide in", while others translate it as "dwell in". Jesus speaks of branches "remaining in" the vine; of the disciples' "remaining in" him; of his "remaining in" them; of his words "remaining in" them; of their "remaining in" his love; and of his "remaining in" the Father's love. What Jesus is getting at here is the need for strong connections; he wants the disciples to remain connected to him, just as strongly as he is connected to the Father, and just as strongly as any branch of a grapevine is connected to the vine. Unless they are connected to him, they can not "bear the fruit" that he desires them to bear.

What *is* that fruit, then? This doesn't become clear until we get to the second half of the reading, in which Jesus says, *My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down his life for his friends. ... This is my command: Love each other* (John 15.12-13, 17). Clearly, then, the "fruit" that Jesus is looking for them to produce is love, as well as actions that are motivated by love.

The practice of referring to a person's attitudes and actions as "fruit" is one that goes back to the Old Testament. The prophet Isaiah, for example, tells a parable that speaks of how frustrated God is with the people of Israel for not living in his ways. The parable is about a farmer who plants a vineyard, using choice grapevines; and about how he feels at harvest time when the vineyard produces bad grapes, rather than the quality grapes he expected. The parable ends with these words, interpreting its meaning:

*The vineyard of the LORD Almighty
is the nation of Israel,
and the people of Judah
are the vines he delighted in.
And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed;
for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.* (Isaiah 5.7)

The bad grapes in the parable, then, signify actions and behaviors that God disapproves of — actions that are contrary to God's ways — specifically, acts of injustice and violence.

In Jesus' own teaching, in the Gospel of Matthew, he likewise refers to people's actions as

the “fruit” that they produce. For example, in his so-called “Sermon on the Mount”, he warns his listeners about false teachers, saying, *By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree can not bear bad fruit, and a bad tree can not bear good fruit. ... Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them* (Matthew 7.16-18, 20). What he means is that false teachers can easily be recognized as such if they don’t live in God’s ways.

Likewise, in today’s Gospel reading, in speaking of bearing fruit, Jesus is speaking about the way his disciples live. Here, though, the issue is not as much about the *quality* of the fruit, as about the *quantity*. Jesus is not talking about good fruit versus bad fruit here, but rather about *much* fruit versus *no* fruit. Of course, he wants them to produce good fruit, but his emphasis here is that they produce lots of it — lots of love, and lots of actions motivated by love. By doing so, they will not only show themselves to be genuine disciples of his, but will also glorify the Father. Further, the only way they will be able to produce the “fruit” or actions that Jesus desires is to stay connected to him — to “remain in” him, as he puts it in today’s reading.

It’s interesting that Jesus’ speeches in John’s Gospel contain very little ethical teaching — very little teaching on how his followers should live. This is in contrast with his teaching in the other three Gospels, in which he has plenty to say about how his followers should live. Mostly, his teaching in John has to do with the purpose of his ministry, and the importance of believing in him. So his “command” to “love each other” in today’s reading, echoing what he said earlier in the Supper Discourse, in Chapter 13, stands out as practically the *only* ethical teaching that Jesus gives in John’s Gospel.

This emphasis on loving each other — and acting accordingly — is found also in today’s reading from the Letters — the First Letter of John — which begins with these words: *Dear friends, let us love each other, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God, and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love* (1 John 4.7-8).

At this point, it’s worth remembering that the Greek word for “love” that’s used in both this reading and the Gospel reading is the familiar word “agápē” — a word that means self-giving love, as opposed to self-serving love. Often when we love another person, it’s because we get some benefit out of our relationship with that person — they make us laugh, for example, or they’re generous, or they’re fun to be around. Agápē is different. It’s the kind of love that motivates us to be kind to someone else; to treat someone else with respect; to listen to what someone else has to say, even if we disagree with them; to be generous and helpful toward someone else, even if they don’t reciprocate; to affirm someone else; to be considerate of someone else’s feelings; and so on — even if that person isn’t particularly lovable.

Agápē comes from God, says John in today’s reading from the Letters. Indeed, God’s agápē is shown most clearly and decisively in his sending Jesus into the world, to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Not only that, but our ability to love — to have and to show agápē — *comes*

from God. *We love because [God] first loved us*, says John (1 John 4.19). Therefore, he argues, we also should love each other. He says, *Since God so loved us, we also ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God, but if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is made complete in us* (1 John 4.11-12). And at the end of the reading, he makes his point even more forcefully. He says, *Whoever claims to love God, yet hates a brother or sister, is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they can see, can not love God, whom they can not see* (1 John 4.20).

The reading from the Letters thus reinforces Jesus' teaching in today's Gospel reading that his disciples and followers should love each other — and act accordingly.

Another parallel between the two readings is the idea of “remaining in”, which I talked about earlier. In the version of the Bible that I use, the reading from the Letters speaks about “living in”, such as when John says, *If we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is made complete in us* (1 John 4.12). But, in his original Greek, John uses the same expression that's used in today's Gospel reading: to “remain in”. So that same sentence can be translated, *If we love each other, God remains in us, and his love is made complete in us*. Likewise, a few sentences later, John says, *Whoever remains in love remains in God, and God remains in them* (1 John 4.16b).

Both the Gospel reading and the reading from the Letters thus emphasize the need for followers of Jesus to love each other, and to remain connected to Jesus and to God. This is as true for us today as it was for Jesus' original disciples and for the people to whom John wrote his letter. Love — agápē — mutual, self-giving love — needs to be the hallmark of Christian ethics and of Christian community.

As we reflect on this, it's hard not to think of Paul's famous passage on love in 1st Corinthians 13: *Love is patient; love is kind. It does not envy; it does not boast; it is not proud. It does not dishonor others; it is not self-seeking; it is not easily angered; it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres* (1 Corinthians 13.4-7). Paul, too, uses the word agápē in his original Greek.

This kind of love does not come easily to us. It may come naturally to parents to feel this kind of love for their children, and to express this kind of love in the way they treat them; but in most other relationships, to feel this kind of love for others and to act on it is challenging. This is why we need to remain connected to Jesus — to God. This kind of love is an attribute of God, and it's only by being in relationship with God that we can be empowered to feel this kind of love for others and to treat them accordingly. Jesus' image of a grapevine and its branches, then, is a very useful one. Just as the branches need to receive moisture and nutrients from the vine in order to produce a crop of grapes, we human beings need the love and power of God to produce the fruit of love in our lives.

Let's keep in mind, though, that being in relationship with God is intentional; it isn't something that happens all by itself. God desires us to be in relationship with him, but we need to

desire to be in relationship with God as well. God has made it possible for us to be in relationship with him, but the relationship requires effort on our part, too. If we don't give our relationship with God the time and attention it deserves, it will falter and wither. If, on the other hand, we do give our relationship with God the time and attention it deserves, we will produce the fruit of love in abundance.

HYMN: I hunger and I thirst

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE:

God of love and compassion:

You invite us into relationship with yourself through Jesus. You have come close to us in him in order to offer us life in all its fullness. And we have chosen to respond — to follow. We have therefore come into your presence to open ourselves to your teaching and your enabling power, both of which you give to us through the Holy Spirit.

We remember today Jesus' teaching that a branch cut off from a grapevine can not bear fruit. Enable us, then, to maintain and strengthen our relationship with you. Enable us also to bear the fruit of love in our lives — not only the attitude, but also actions that are motivated by it. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, enable us to have and to practise the same self-giving love that Jesus showed in his ministry, and in his death and resurrection.

We pray for your church throughout the world, that it may increasingly be a community characterized by mutual love and by active concern for the well-being of others. May the church increasingly be what *you* want it to be, not necessarily what we, its members, might want it to be.

We pray for members of our congregation, members of Knox Church in Neepawa, family members, and others close to us, who are dealing with difficulties of any kind today, in particular, those whom we now name before you in silence: _____. You know each one's needs, gracious God; and we pray that you would grant your strength, wisdom, healing, or encouragement to each one, in response to their needs. May they sense your presence and your care.

We pray also for the world at large. As we pray for people in positions of authority today, we pray for efforts to deal with sexual misconduct in the military. We give thanks for the courage of victims of sexual misconduct who have made complaints against their abusers; and we pray that this issue may be treated with all the seriousness that it deserves. May those in positions of authority in both the military and the government take corrective action, and may those who have done wrong face the consequences that their actions deserve.

We give thanks today for the life of Thomas Berger, who died this week, and for what he accomplished during his lifetime in defending the interests of the Indigenous peoples of our coun-

try. May his life's work inspire the current and future generations of our country's leaders to do the same.

We continue to pray for those affected by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. We pray for those caring for the sick, especially as the health care system is again coming under strain due to high numbers of infections. We pray for wisdom for public health officials and politicians as they keep having to make decisions on restrictions. We pray for those for whom the restrictions create difficulty, stress, and anxiety. We pray for the effort to produce the necessary quantities of vaccines and to make them available to the public. We pray for those who have lost loved ones to the disease. In each situation, we pray that you would provide guidance, strength, stamina, and encouragement, to sustain people and give them hope. We look forward to the day when all restrictions can be lifted, and we can get back to normal activities without having to worry about what the virus might do to us; and we pray that you would sustain us all as we wait for that time to arrive.

We pray in particular today for the people of India, who are enduring a particularly severe outbreak of COVID-19; that the international community may provide resources and materials that are in short supply; that infected individuals may increasingly be able to receive the care they need; and that the outbreak may soon be brought under control.

We pray again about the long-term care system in our country, the deficiencies of which have been brought into sharp focus by the pandemic. We pray that provincial governments across the country may take this issue seriously, and be willing to spend the money needed to ensure that those requiring long-term care are properly cared for, including higher wages for those who look after them.

We thank you that you hear our prayers, gracious God, and we offer them up to you in the name of Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

OFFERING:

This is point in the service at which the offering is normally received, so we will do so "virtually" today.

Let us present to God our sacrifice of thanksgiving — our tithes and offerings.

And let's join in singing the doxology — "Sing we to our God above"

DOXOLOGY: Sing we to our God above

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING AND DEDICATION:

Gracious and faithful God:

We give you thanks for your unfailing love for us, and for all the ways in which we experience your love in our day-to-day living. Especially we thank you for graciously offering us reconciliation with you and a place in your family through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

In response, we present our offerings to you, as a sign of our gratitude — and also as a sign of our love for you and for our fellow human beings.

Use our offerings, we pray, to strengthen the work of your church in the world, so that more and more people may learn of your love, and may experience it in tangible ways.

We pray in the name of Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

HYMN: Praise him, praise him, Jesus our blessed Redeemer!

COMMISSIONING AND BLESSING:

Brothers and sisters in Christ:

Go into the week ahead, now,

in peace,

and in the strength of the Holy Spirit,

to keep growing in your relationship with God,

and to continue producing the fruit of love in your lives.

And may God bless you:

May he continue to guide and empower you,

and may he give you his peace and joy;

in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.