

Fifth Sunday of Easter: The Vines and the Branches

It is absolutely amazing to me how plants grow here in Florida. Those of you who live here know that if you don't keep after your lawn and garden, it will quickly go out of control. Thirty five years ago I lived in a house with a big back yard. There were some shrubs along the edge of the yard. One day, I noticed that there were some vines starting to grow around the shrubs. I never got around to getting rid of them. Before I knew it I couldn't even see the shrubs. They were completely covered by the vine leaves. Actually I thought they looked quite beautiful. The vines made the area look like a soft green pillow. Soon, though, I learned that the vines were killing the shrubs and becoming a haven for snakes and other undesirable creatures. They had to go. I asked the parish maintenance man, a former policeman who had no clue about gardening, to get rid of the vines. Now he was a big, strong man. So he tried to use his brute strength on the vines. He pulled and pulled, but got nowhere. My Mom and Dad were young retirees at the time. I told them about it. They said that they would take care of it very quickly. They went into the yard and cut the main vines coming out of the ground. Nature did the rest. In a couple of weeks all the leaves and branches died. Mom and Dad easily pulled them off the shrubs.

"I am the vine, you are the branches," the Lord says. We have great strength and power when we are attached to, united to the Eternal Vine. We have the life force of the Lord flowing through us. Our strength comes from our union with Christ.

The Catholic Church in the United States is very beautiful. When he came over for one of his visits, Pope St. John Paul II was amazed at things we take for granted, which certainly are part of Catholicism. He commended American Catholics for their care and concern for all the poor and under trodden, their deep reverence for the sacraments, and the tremendous work in the areas of liturgies so that Masses may present an experience of Christ. The Church in the United States is certainly living. The American Church is strong because it is united to the Vine.

The Church is also strong due to people who are extremely generous with their time, talent and treasure. There are all sorts of programs run totally by our parishioners. Our families are very Christian and very beautiful. We are under the beautiful umbrella tree of Christ's love. But the beauty of all those leaves is due to the source of their life. They get their life from the main vine. Christ is the source of our beauty.

We must fight to stay united to our Lord, our Vine. He is our life blood. We have to pray to him every day. We have to continue to seek his love as he extend it to us. We have to avoid severing our relations with him.

"See what love the Father has bestowed on us in becoming children of God," says St. John in the second reading for this Sunday . Look at all the beautiful parts of our lives. The beauty is there because God is there. Should we lose God we will be cut off from the vine. When my Mom and Dad cut the branches on that vine in my

back yard, the immediate result was an eyesore. The leaves became brown and ugly. Cut off from God we also become an eyesore to humanity and to ourselves. But united with him we are a work of divine art.

The Gospel speaks about bearing fruit. If the branch is united to the vine, it bears much fruit. God calls us to make His message real in the world. He calls us to bring His Love to the world. He is not calling us just to be in His presence. He is calling us to use His Presence to transform the world. Husbands and wives, parents and children, neighbors and friends, priests and laity, are called to live the only Life that matters so completely that others are attracted to that Life, within the home, within the neighborhood and within the world. The Life of Christ is indeed a magnet. When people experience this Life in others they want it for themselves. These people, those who turn to God, are fruit. Our union with God draws them to God. They are the fruit we have been called to bear.

"By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples." We come to Church to praise God, to worship God, but if this is all we do, reverence His Presence here, and then return to a pagan world living like pagans, accepting and even flaunting pagan values, we are not really worshiping God. We are only worshiping God when we take what we experience in church out to a world that longs for His Presence. A number of years ago, our Diocese focused in on the Eucharist. It took on the motto: Gathered, Nourished and Sent. This is what we do every time we are at Mass. We gather so we may be nourished. We are nourished so we may be sent to others.

When we live our Christianity in our workplace, at our schools, in our neighborhoods, others experience the Word of God that is within us. And the very Power of God will work through us in ways beyond our understanding, for that is Who God is, the one who is beyond our understanding.

God is with us, yes. But to have a relationship with God, we need to be with Him too.

Let me tell you a story about a family, we'll call them the Jones family. The Jones Family lives in a home like yours in a town like ours. And like every family, there are special times when the whole family gets together. This really means a lot to Kate and Bill Jones. They are in their 50's, both working, but their four children have begun their own lives. Two, Frank and Anne, are married and both have children. The other two, Sam and Jean are in the "still looking" faze of life. Bill and Kate just love it when they have their children and now their grandchildren all together for a dinner, or just to chat for awhile.

The sad thing is that for the last number of years, Jean has kept away from the family. For reasons they don't completely understand, Jean wants nothing to do with her parents or siblings. They haven't seen her in three years. She is completely alienated from the family. Phone calls to her are answered tersely or messages in her

voice mail are ignored. Kate and Bill have asked her repeatedly why she wants nothing to do with them, but she just says, "I'm too busy." They still love her. She's their daughter. But she is not there, never there with them.

You could say: they are with her, but she refuses to be with them.

This same thing can happen in our relationship with God. God is with us. He even proclaims at the end of the *Gospel of Matthew*, "Know that I am with you always." All of us know that God wants to be One with us. But that is not good enough. He may be with us, but the relationship suffers or even ceases to exist if we are not with Him.

"I am the vine, you are the branches," the Lord says in today's Gospel. Remain in me as I remain in you. The Lord is like Kate and Bill Jones loving His children, always caring for them. But sometimes, too often, we are like Jean. He is with us, but we alienate ourselves from Him.

Sometimes we come upon people who live immoral lives, and say, "I know God loves me. I'll be OK." Insufficient. It is not enough for us to say, "God loves me." We have to want to be related to God. We have to be united to the vine for His Love to flow into us.

This is what Jesus is speaking about in the Gospel. Knowing where the vine is does not allow the branches to be nourished by the life of the vine. The branches must be part of the vine, grafted onto the vine. God loves us infinitely more than Bill and Kate love their daughter Jean. But like Jean, if we refuse to enter into our Father's love then we will not have his life flowing through us.

But if we do fight hard to have a union with God, if we fight against those negative forces around us and within us that are trying to separate us from God, then we can continue to experience the flow of God's life within us and through us towards others. When we do this, when we are united to the vine, then we can do the work of the Christian. We can draw others to Him. We can bear fruit.

We fight against all evil forces trying to keep us from union with the Vines. And so we pray:

"Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle. Be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil; May God rebuke him, we humbly pray; And do thou, O Prince of the Heavenly Host, by the power of God, thrust into hell Satan and all evil spirits who wander through the world seeking the ruin of souls. Amen."