

Highland Presbyterian Church
5th Sunday of Easter – April 28, 2022
A sermon by Megan McCarty

Jeremiah 17:5-12

John 15:1-8

“I am the vine. You are the branches.” These are the words we have been using for our communion liturgy for the last few months. And today, we see where in scripture this comes from. John 15 and Jeremiah 17 invite us to think about the spiritual lessons that we can learn from plants.

A grape vine is an incredible plant and one that everyone in first century Palestine would have been familiar with. If you have ever seen vineyards, you know that grapes will climb all along fences and will reach out and position themselves to receive the most sunlight possible. But all these crawling vines and reaching branches are connected to one main stem that can grow as thick as it needs to support the vines and branches. In fact, what we think is the oldest living grape vine has a base that is 13 feet in circumference. And that plant has lived for hundreds of years and produced over 600 pounds of grapes every year.

The metaphor of Jesus being the vine or base and the disciples, or us, being the branches spread out all over communicates mutual dependence, provision, union, and sustenance. One of the primary claims of John’s gospel is to assure believers that in their believing, they share in the relationship between Jesus and God now and always. “I am the vine, you are the branches” is both promise and possibility. While the branches cannot live without the vine, the vine doesn’t have much to give without the branches. There is mutual need between Jesus and his disciples.

In Jeremiah we hear that “you shall be like a tree planted by the water.” There are a lot of lessons we can learn from these amazing plants. Creation speaks to how we are to relate to one another and if we want to build a society that is loving, we should look at the trees and glean our lessons from creation. Trees live in community; a forest has an entire ecosystem, and everything is dependent upon being interconnected.

If you look at the redwood forest, it consists of these massive, tall trees. You would think that they would need an intensely deep root system to support the tall trees. But they actually have a surprisingly shallow root system. Even though these trees grow about 300 feet high, their roots only go down about 6 feet. But it’s because their roots actually grow out instead of down. They intertwine with the roots of the trees around them and make one another strong. They must be connected with one another in order to survive. If one of these trees get damaged, the other trees in the area will send their nutrients and resources to the damaged tree through the interconnected root system.

If you look at a rainforest, you know that it consists of a very tall tree top canopy and a very shady ground cover. These trees are also connected through their root system. When the sun rises in the morning, the trees that receive the sunlight first pass on all those nutrients through their root system so that even smaller trees living in deep shade can thrive.

And finally, if we look at any tree, we notice how trees are good neighbors. They always give shelter to any being that comes along. They don't ever put up fences or not allow creatures into their care. If they are a fruit bearing tree, they bear fruit that they never enjoy.

If we look at all these examples, I wonder what the big take aways are for us? Are we able to recognize our need to be interconnected with one another? It's not a popular notion in our country to ask for help or be able to depend on one another for anything. But if we were sharing resources, there would be more for everyone. Look at this amazing potluck spread: if everyone contributes, it creates an incredible abundance for all. And if we are sharing with those who have less, they can thrive even in the harshest situations.

Like trees who are good neighbors, are we able to operate with empathy and love to allow people who are different than us to find a home? What fruit are we bearing for the next generation? The fruit that we might not ever enjoy but is for others. There are so many spiritual and communal lessons that we can learn from trees and vines. When we are dependent on Jesus as the true vine, we can see how we have the strength and mindset to take what we learn from the trees and put it into action so that we are caring for everyone, sharing, and producing fruit for the next generation instead of taking and destroying.

This is obviously an extremely subversive and countercultural message. But it shouldn't be. It should be obvious that as we are created to be in relationship with one another, we should also take care of each other. But somewhere along the way, the message changed and transformed and we now think it's up to us to do everything for ourselves. As Christians, we have the power to change this message. We can live into these spiritual lessons from creation, even if the world around us doesn't. Our actions are an expression of faithfulness. We can do the little things to support one another and share resources and depend upon one another even when it's hard and society tells us that this makes us weak. It is up to us to do the hard truth-telling, to share testimony, to live into hope.

If we are dependent upon Jesus, the true vine, for our strength, we know that we are not weak. But we are called to live into this countercultural message. I'm going to ask us, since we're already in a slightly informal setting, to share a little with one another because we are each other's greatest resource. What is one thing that you can do to live into this hope? What is one thing that you are doing to produce fruit for the next generation? What is one thing that you are doing or can do to lift others up and share resources and care for those in our society that have less? Pick a person or a couple of people around and start a

conversation and then I'm going to ask us to shout out different things that folks talked about.

I had us do this because we need to recognize that we are here for one another as resources, as support, as brainstorming partners. We are not meant to do this work alone. And it's not a competition. If you heard a great idea today and you want to try it, do it! It's not stealing or cheating because you didn't come up with it. We're all in this together, learning and growing and figuring out how to walk alongside Jesus and one another. Let us remember with joy the lessons we have learned and are continuing to learn from creation. On this beautiful day, let us praise our maker and our true vine. Amen.