

OK, your RISUS PASCHALIS, your Easter joke.

GOLFER: "Do you think my game is improving?" CADDY: "Yes sir, you miss the ball much closer now."  
 GOLFER: "I'd move heaven and earth to break 100 on this course." CADDY: "Try heaven. You've already moved most of the earth." GOLFER: "Do you think I can get there with a 5 iron?" CADDY: "Eventually."  
 GOLFER: "You've got to be the worst caddy in the world." CADDY: "I don't think so sir. That would be too much of a coincidence." GOLFER: "How do you like my game?" CADDY: "Very good sir, but personally, I prefer golf." GOLFER: "Do you think it's a sin to play on Sunday?" CADDY: "The way you play, sir, it's a sin on any day."

OK, some gospel background. A vine connects the earth with the branches. It is a medium, a conduit between the fertility of the ground and the fruit that is produced on the branch. In a similar way, Jesus is also a vine, a mediator, the connection between God and us. The divine-human connection is always present, but we are not always conscious of it. Jesus is the true vine because He is always conscious of this connection. The word for 'true' in Greek means a lack of forgetfulness. The TRUE Vine remembers at all times the communion between 'all there is' and the 'Source of All There Is.' This means that the True Vine lives simultaneously in the changing fluctuations of human time – and in the ETERNAL NOW of God. This is reality for all of us – while we all live in our daily realities, we are also connected to God and therefore living in the eternal now. But we're not very good at remembering this – or living it out.

If the comparison between a vine and Jesus were to be strictly applied, the Father would be the earth. But this Gospel of John – as do all mystical texts – uses language freely, beyond the constraints of logic, to express and communicate spiritual realities. "The Father" is ultimately directing the life and love that flows through Jesus. Therefore, the Father is the vinegrower -- whose ultimate goal is to produce vintage wine. With this goal in mind, He cuts away fruitless branches and prunes fruitful branches to produce more.

The laws that govern biological life are not the laws that govern spiritual life. But there are similarities. In spiritual development there is a need for desire – and effort. If desire is missing, biological life goes on under its own plan. But spiritual life – the passion, pleasure, and purpose that suffuses all life – recedes. A death is slowly occurring without our God-connection, not the death of our physical body, but of the spiritual vibrancy that is the desire of God for us. This is how people can say after they have an encounter with someone who is deeply connected to God – "I just feel better after I am in their presence," or "I feel more like my true self," or "I want be a better person after being with them." There is an aliveness that we know is somehow the key to a real and deep life.

The vinegrower knows these laws of spiritual development. His cutting away of dead branches is not a whim or lack of compassion. It is a recognition that if desire or effort is missing, the dying process is under way. GOT THAT?! If desire or effort is missing, we are dying! But if people are trying, and trying is the operative word, then pruning is opportune. Spiritual development is just that, development. Although a definite end is often envisioned (for ex, union with God and the producing of good works), spiritual growth is more an adventure in becoming than a step-by-step march toward a goal. There is always the possibility of more and better fruit. This is what guides the scissors of the vinegrower. This also reminds us that discipleship is never a status; it is never complete; it is a never-ending process. (all very freely adapted from John Shea, EATING WITH THE BRIDEGROOM, p. 128-130)

Second, so what do we do with this? The discipleship process is one of growing – growing more deeply in love. With God and with one another. The connection to the Vine leads to depth, and that connection to the Vine, leads us to connect to all of the other branches – others. I love the way Pope Benedict put it in his first encyclical letter “God is Love:” *We have come to believe in God’s love:* in these words the Christian can express the fundamental decision of life. Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.” (1B)

Al Lingren is a professor at Garrett Theological Seminary. He had a conversation with his teenage son, who asked Lingren “Dad, what is the toughest thing God ever tried to do?”

I can tell you, they teach a lot of things in the seminary. But they don’t exactly cover this question. Lingren wracked his brain for an answer, then asked his son, “What do you think it was?”

The boy said, “Since taking science in school, I thought the creation of the world might be the hardest thing God ever tried to do, and in Sunday school we got to talking about some of the miracles, and I thought the resurrection might be the toughest thing God ever tried to do. But, after thinking about it some more, I think that the toughest thing God ever had to do is to get us to understand who He is and that He loves us.”

That kid got it. “The toughest thing God ever had to do is to get us to understand who He is and that He loves us.” How did God get us to understand who He is? First, through the Law and the prophets. And then through coming to us in the flesh, in the person of Jesus Christ. And how did God get us to understand that He loves us? By dying on the cross in Jesus and rising again.

We just heard from the 1<sup>st</sup> Letter of John. 2 verses before where our text begins today, John wrote: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for one another.”

Third, the essence of Christian faith is not dogma, it is not correct liturgy, it is not judging others about who is worthy and who is not. It is about love. Here are a few quotes from this 1<sup>st</sup> letter of John -- which is all about love: “Behold, what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called the children of God....For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another....This is how we know that God loves us, because He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.....Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”

This is the essence of the Gospel: “Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” But we know this is extremely difficult.

Many years ago, Jeffrey Collins was director of a nonprofit group called Love and Action. This is an organization that ministers to AIDS patients and their families.

Collins tells of receiving a phone call at 5:00 on a Friday afternoon as he was trying to leave the office. Collins had just worked a 60-hour week. He was exhausted and wanted to ignore the phone. But he answered it anyway.

The voice on the other end of the line was Jimmy, a client of Love & Action. Jimmy was very sick and very scared. Collins confesses that his first emotion when he answered the call wasn’t compassion, but anger. He really wanted to go home and rest. He wanted a couple of hours at the end of the week when no one needed him. Many of you know exactly what that’s like. But Collins knew that God’s calling isn’t dependent

on how we feel, but on how badly someone else needs us. So, Jeffrey Collins headed over to Jimmy's house to check on him.

Jimmy was on the sofa, shivering and feverish and covered in vomit. The smell was horrible. Though he was very careful not to show it, Jeffrey's anger and annoyance grew. As he knelt down and scrubbed vomit out of the carpet surrounding the sofa, Jeffrey prayed an angry prayer to God. But here's what came out of that experience.

A friend of Jimmy's named Russ came in to find Jeffrey kneeling beside the sofa, cleaning up Jimmy's vomit. With an astonished look on his face, Russ said, "Now I understand! Now I understand!"

"Understand what?" Jimmy asked weakly.

"I understand who Jesus is," Russ said through tears. "He's like Jeff!"

It isn't always easy to love. We tend to withhold love until someone passes our 'approval test.' We love those who we think are deserving of our love – which is exactly the opposite of Jesus' love. He didn't love us because we were easy to love or deserved it. He loves us with the heart of God, which is a heart of love.

Love is our primary witness to the world. If we are not known for our love, then we are not known for our Christianity, our discipleship. How will the world know we are Christians? By our love. If the day comes when the church is as loving as Christ, the world will beat a path to our door. John asks, "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?" And the answer is, it doesn't.

Love is our primary witness to the world. Let us be known by our love, connected to the Vine, connected to the branches. Amen. (last two points from DYNAMIC PREACHING, p. 82-83, Jan-April 2021)