



Blessed Sacrament Parish
Homily by Father Chris Comerford
April 29, 2018 fifth Sunday of Easter

Reading I Acts 9:26-31

Psalm 22:26-32

Reading II 1 John 3:18-24

Gospel John 15:1-8

Homily

I thought spring was going to be here, but it is cold today. But I think it is temporary this time. Clearly things are beginning to bloom and blossom out there and the colors are coming alive. It is a great time of the year. It is a powerful time to hear this image that Jesus gives to his people that you can relate to at this time of the year, and it deals with their culture — the vine, the branches. You don't see a lot of vines around here except in vineyards. The vines that I know best are the vines growing on the wall in Chicago. We know that the vines were important for the culture during the time Jesus lived as grapes were one of the staples of their lives. And they could understand these vines. But there is even more to the image. We know they had them in the fields that were close to them but as you went into the temple there was this archway covered in gold and carved into the gold was this huge image of vines and grapes. That image is clearly from the Psalms of the connectedness of God and his people. That is the first image you would see going into the house of God. So it would be very fresh in their minds to hear Jesus speak of this.

He is also testing this story at the last supper. Thus, clearly this is connected with grapes, the Eucharist, his body and blood. So it is in this that Jesus talks about connecting God with us. So we see that Jesus in the vine, the Father in the vine grower — he is the one who takes care of us. How does he do that? First: He gets rid of those who do not bear fruit. Second: The ones that do bear fruit he also takes care of — he prunes each one so that we will bear more fruit. I never really understood pruning. When my parents would prune I would think, "You're cutting it back. It will die. There is not any growth on it." But no. It had to happen to grow more fruit. We cut back and that is a great image Jesus used for us. So often we forget that things get in the way and the choices that we make sometimes are not good and needs to be pruned away. Now, that can hurt, it can be painful to prune away the parts that are not healthy in our lives. But when that happens, we can truly grow. It is a wonderful reflection that Jesus gives us.

He even spoke of the best way this pruning could happen for his followers. I don't know about you, but when I hear the words "God, and prune" I think, "I'm not doing very well. I can do better. I haven't really followed what God wants me to do." That can hurt but it is only to make us grow more, not ashamed or feel guilt — but to be stronger and be the best version of ourselves that we can be.

And then Jesus goes on to tell us how to be united. He says, "Remain in me as I in you." He tells about connecting that life that flows between, and that we even receive that life of grace only when we are connected to Jesus. "I am the vine and you are the branches." In order to bear fruit we have to be that connected with Christ. And that is the challenge for us even if we are reminded of this over and over again. So we have to open ourselves and see that life of grace that Jesus wants to give us and not do things that separate us.

The great thing about God is that he allows us to come back, and to be reconnected to the vine. Even if we have broken it off we can be healed through the Sacraments and Reconciliation. It is about being reconnected. That is what the word "reconcile" sounds like, "reconnected." What a gift he offers us, and God wants us to bear fruit for the Kingdom. And it is a challenge. How is God calling me to bear fruit, how is God calling you to bear fruit? How is God calling all of us to bear fruit?

Some say, "I don't have anything to offer, just a tiny little branch." No. With God all things are possible and all of us are important. God has a plan for each one of us. The challenge is to say, "God, use me in a way that you desire." I know when I pray that prayer I get a little nervous because I am not in control. "God, how do you want to use me?" That is what we should ask for in our prayer for because God has a plan for each one of us. We want to be brought into that new life. Amazing things can happen.

We heard about Paul in the first reading today. Can you imagine if you were one of the disciples and Paul walked into the room? Do you remember who Paul was? He was Saul and it was Saul who organized things to lock Christians up and put them to death. It would be kind of like, "What is he doing here?" It is interesting because you might be in a position where you have changed a lot but the other people do not know it. I was thinking about that when I was college age and I had not always been as excited about living my faith. And I remember making fun of people who were too Christian. And then one time I went to a prayer gathering that was going on and being drawn back to God and getting that look by others, "What is he doing here?" It is hard to admit that sometimes, and I am sure that is how the disciples felt when Paul walked in. Part of us has to stand up for him and say, "God, help him. I saw him. He saw Jesus. He's changed." But the disciples were still not sure.

So Paul begins preaching around and the disciples saw the impact he was having on everyone and they saw how neighbors were attacking him and finally they believed and accepted him. It is amazing what God can do. Incredible. Paul had a conversion. If Paul can be changed, any of us can be changed. Any of us. When the early church began to have troubles the disciples prayed to have that great trust in God that Paul had and they prayed, "God, what do you want me to do?" Today we need to open our hearts and ask, "God, what do you want me to do? How do you want me to be to bear fruit for your Kingdom?"

*Father Christopher Comerford is pastor of Blessed Sacrament Parish in Quincy, IL.
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