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The Vinedresser

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I am the vine you are the branches. This good news is fraught with danger. There is danger because Jesus is speaking in “figures of speech” as he himself clarifies in later sentences of his farewell (16:25). Jesus is warning against taking his news at face value: figures of speech have to be heard according to what you know of your speaker and of the tensions within the image. And, Jesus says, you have to hear this news *against* the hour that is coming, the hour when I speak plainly of the Father. That hour comes, so shortly after. Jesus’ brief speech is plain indeed: “It is finished,” exhaled with the breath of life from the dust of his broken flesh.

But there is still more danger for us about this good news. Our danger about this good news in our hearing is that it hits eardrums stiff and hardened with 2,000 years of wax build-up. Like the images on the Sistine Chapel ceiling caked with a half-millennium of added black soot, incense stains, acid, dust, oxidation, and moisture applied by human breath and sweat, we hear this image through ears blocked by a build-up of associations caked on by human use. We do not hear “I am the vine and you are the branches” in all its brilliant, vivid sharpness. But as with the Sistine Chapel, when one labors to clean away all the build-up, suddenly the image of Jesus the vine and you the branches is new, unexpected, startling, different, perhaps strange to behold.

It is dangerous, that “I am the vine, you are the branches.” Recently, it exploded in my hands.

It happened this way. I was sitting in a hospital room with a man dying a lingering-fading-stripping-away-to-the –merest-of-bones death. Hallowing time with him as he labored unto death meant singing liturgical songs, praying the psalms, returning to hymns long loved, marking the hours with leaves from the tree of life, dipped in the waters of his baptismal freedom, and offered to his parched hopes for life. I

had been there for some days already, the LBW falling open easily to the great songs of morning prayer, mid-day prayer, vespers, and compline. Once a beautiful bass, he could not sing, but would give the merest nod that "Yes, we could sing the prayers together." So I did sing with his silent descant.

One afternoon, in the winter twilight, as I sat futilely wondering how he could possibly be living any longer, suddenly, after hours of unmoving silence with words only a glance or gesture, shaking mightily, he raised up on his elbow, pointed high up and gasped, "Open the door." But all the doors in the room were open. I stood up, leaned close as he flopped back on the mattress. "What do you want me to do for you?" He barely mustered the words. "Open the door." I said, "You are not talking about the door to the room are you?" He shook, sighing, "No." I sat for a long time in silence, staring at his closed eyes. Finally, I admitted, "I don't know what you need. I don't know what to do." He opened his eyes, staring at me for a long time. I thought he did not comprehend. Finally, he exhaled a sigh almost too deep for words, "I need a master."

I turned that over and over, he had several masters, richly schooled in the arts, he was not talking about something academic. Finally, desperate, I asked him if he needed something like a Zen master. He stared at me, disappointment etched with frustration, rolled his eyes back and closed them.

I sat for a long time, in silence chiseled with those brief whispers. Clearly he was asking for something he believed I should be able to supply.

That's when our text exploded in my hands. I opened up the NRSV, looking for something, for words as solid and true as the liturgy and hymns that had been our conversation for so many days. I went to John. This man who was dying had set texts from John, played John's Passion so many times, lived by the poesis of John's good news, he loved John since his studies at Pacific Lutheran and his years and years of making music, songs and dances for the liturgy of Christ.

I opened to this, "I am the vine, my Father is the Vinedresser... who removes every branch in me that does not bear fruit..." I skimmed down. "I am the vine, you are the branches ... then ... thrown away like a branch and withers, gathered, thrown into the fire and burned." He had, years before, stated that he wanted his body to be burned, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

These words exploded, the text detonated in my hearing. I thought of all the ways I have heard this text used. I thought of all the ways it has shut doors in history; how it has licensed us to shut people out, cut people off, wither away created differences and burn up life — because of how we chose to read it. This was not news I could say to this silent, advent man, whose life was more cut off and withered by his grief, guilt, shame, loss, sorrow and loneliness than any mere virus could ever achieve. This cradle Lutheran, so conscious of his adult baptism in the chapel of Pacific Lutheran University, so conscious of how he had betrayed himself, falling short of the calling for which he had been cleansed, falling short of his dreams for a future. I sat with this Gospel spread out on my lap, staring at leaves from the healing tree of life which I could not imagine speaking aloud to him as he looked towards a threshold I could not see. The fury rose as I pondered how we have managed as a holy people to pollute so these holy words for ourselves that we can neither eat nor offer as food the leaves of the tree of life without fear of toxins, the stuff we manufacture and pour into the waters of life as we dam it up, channel it, bottle it, funnel it across the processing plants of our reactive minds.

I closed the book. Mercifully, for me, he had fallen asleep. Homeward, I stopped for counsel with a Mennonite mechanic, who considered my story and calmly stated, “He means a master key, Jann, a key that opens all doors.”

A key that opens all doors. The cross unlocks heaven and shatters the gates of hell. Yet I was haunted by “I am the vine, you are the branches,” by how that ancient Near Eastern fertility symbol for all creation withers into a tree of law almost instantaneously in our mathematized version of God’s reality. The verbs become only nouns — “bear fruit, wither, thrown away, burned” become a check list of adjectives about our human condition. We stop reading the image as a figure of speech. We stop practicing this metaphor, working its tension next to the simple declaration, “It is finished.” We stop reading it next to the bare Word, stripped and dead, the one verb Jesus making plain the will of the Father.

When we fail to enter into the dynamic reality of the vision Jesus proposes, when we fail to see this true vine as the one bearing fruit on a dressed stump on a hill outside the walls of the holy city, we fail to see the God Jesus introduces in his farewell. Jesus says farewell by

giving us the image of God, eternally calling out “hello,” not farewell. Jesus plants the image of the vine in the middle of those whose feet he has just washed. Jesus plants the image of this fertile little tree of life in the middle of those who have watched for a millennium for the king of David to come as they imagine the mighty cedars and sovereign trees the prophets foretold, great kingdom builders growing from tiny shoots in whose branches all creatures can find shade, life, food, community, and fertile peace. But Jesus plants the image of the vine and the vinedresser, machete in hand, in the middle of a group of followers about to witness him, torn out by the roots, hacked down, pruned brutally, clean cut off from every hope of life, and thrown out on the garbage heap outside the city of God.

His farewell is a promise, “Love one another, just as I have loved you. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you, abide in my love.” This little true vine, offered before the flood of death, is Jesus’ olive branch, his sign of hope so they will not “stumble.”

But Jesus gives more. Jesus gives the Vinedresser. I use the old language because it admits of the violence involved in gardening; speaks of tools that cut, slash, grind up, tear down, rip away, axe down. Vinedressing means abundant life by way of dying.

But the goal, as any gardener knows, is not how much you can kill. The goal is abundant, fruitful fragrant life. It is not a mathematized way of looking at reality. We do not say that a pruner is killing the tree, we say that a pruner is giving the branches air and space to grow and become the fruitful canopy that the gardener sees, even while planting the gnarled stick that looks rootless and lifeless.

The Vinedresser is wholistic, we are digital. We mathematize the poetry of God’s gardening. We split the metaphor into equations, one for one formulas for counting those to burn, those to water, those who are sheep, those who are goats. That is not Jesus’ good news.

Jesus’ shocking good news is that God, Abba, is a Vinedresser and Jesus is under the Vinedresser’s hand; cut down, hacked, torn, slashed open, so that into these very wounds, all those who are withered, lost, dead, dried up and cut off, can be thrust in, sealed over in the oil of Jesus’ gladness and cleansed by the rising sap of the Holy Spirit, in whose light the lifeless leaf out in green.

I AM, *the great I AM*, the vine. Jesus’ shocking news is: My Father is the Vinedresser, removing every branch, IN ME, in me, the I AM.

In the ecology of God's organic grace, IN ME, whatever is composted, burned, waste, mulch and ash is caught up in the roots. Mingled with water and light and the fire of God's true life, ashes bring forth leaves like wheat arising green, Love come again. Cleansed by this very word, this true promise, it *is* finished. All the fear, the pain, the crying, the sorrow, mourning, the tears, they are no more; they express what has already passed away, the curse of death and all its empty promises. All the bean-counting of our souls and the souls of others, all the competition for the last seats available in paradise, all the locked doors of our self-loathing and guilt...it is all finished. It counts for nothing. It has no hold.

What is *not* finished, *not* passed away is the God who abides: the Vinedresser, the Vine, the very fruitfulness of branching and fruiting caught up in the rising sap of the one whose glory is a harvest of Love. To say it in the plainest of speech. Jesus abides in us, *as in the Father*, unconditionally, for the sheer "so-loving-the-world" of it. So loving, the only word for it is joy. All that is left for us is to abide with this God who is already abiding in us, an abiding of unceasing love, of unending hello, of eternally unlocked welcome.

Can we hear that? Or is it just too much grace?

Do we have to get out our little pruning hooks and hack and whittle away at that until it looks like a thicket of thistles? A bunch of miseries from the horticulture handbook of the soul. The tree of law just makes so much more sense. You can count it all out that way. This one is cut off, this one looks fruitful, this one, God knows, is withered, burn it. So the world is littered with the wrecked topiary trees of our stunted imaginations of God. The Vine, the Vinedresser, and the living branches is not math or science or psychology formula. Unless, of course, the three in one *is* a math problem. It is a figure of mystery of grace beyond our telling, beyond our plainest speech, beyond our finest song, it is the mystery of God laying hold of creation in the vine, like the bridegroom in Song of Songs who lays hold of the body of his beloved just exactly as those who lay hold of wisdom and discover a tree of life.

Because of this lavish tree, full of leaves for healing, I went the next day to the man who lay dying, waiting for the door to be opened. This time I had a master key, plucked from John (John 10:11) "Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. I am the gate. Whoever enters by

me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture.” I read this promise to the man waiting for death, waiting for life. His eyes flickered open. He stared. I said, “In the flood of God’s mercy, you were given the key in baptism. That mercy is the master, the door has been opened. It has been open all along. Stretch out your hand, in it you have God’s promise of life, it will open any door. Walk through, you are free, and it is beautiful.”

He almost smiled. We offered him a sip of wine, a tiny bit of bread in thanksgiving. He ate and drank heaven’s own freedom. We traced the tree of life on his forehead, marking the one who abides in him. He made the sign of the cross after us. And, hours later, he walked into the arms of the tree of life.

“I am the vine, you are the branches.” What joy there is when we abide in the freedom that brings. What would the church look like if we could resist being the ones with the pruning hooks sharpened in the whetstones of our fears? What would we look like if we could abide such a Grace? What kind of loud voice would the church have in the world if we really took to announcing in loud voices: “The dwelling place of God is among humankind, active in the twelve months of history’s years?” What kind of things that we give first place would pass away if we lived as if God’s IN ME were true? Whose faces might show up on the branches next to us? What discarded parts of creation might we draw up into the roots of our souls?

These rich days have passed over quickly, we have washed each other’s feet, basked in the song of Christ. Now, we must get up and go out, with bread and wine as our strength for journeys to come. Remember the Vine tree, remember the Vinedresser and cry out with a loud Voice in all your days: “I have seen a new heaven and a new earth.” And cry, “Freedom.” This is good news, fraught with danger. But the danger is only our refusal to abide, our refusal to imagine, our refusal to enter into the tension of this God, living abundantly in fearless love.

In the name of the Vine, the Vinedresser and the holy Rising Life, to whom be all honor and glory now and forever.