

FIRST IMPRESSIONS      FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER (B)  
Acts 9: 26-31      Psalm 22      I John 3: 18-24      John 15: 1-8  
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The familiar image of Jesus as the true vine has a strong assertion behind it. Both the vine and vineyard images appear in prophetic literature. In the Jewish setting, Israel was the vine. (e.g. Ps 80: 5, 9-10 , Is. 5: 7). In claiming to be the "true vine," Jesus is taking Israel's place, so that now, the true Israel is Jesus. God wanted fruit from the Chosen People and in addressing them, Jesus is saying that if they (we) stay with him we will bear that fruit. If we want to mature and become fully the humans God intended, we need to stay connected to Jesus.

As I reflect on today's readings, I am drawn to the popular and strong image of the grape vine which Jesus uses to refer to himself. "I am" statements frequently appear in John's Gospel. "I am the Good Shepherd (last week's reference)... I am living bread... I am the true vine...." Notice how he puts an adjective in front of the noun. He is the "true" vine. It seems he is telling us that there may be other sources of life, or so we think, but that he is the real, the authentic source of life for us. This passage comes from the Last Discourse. Jesus is preparing his disciples for his coming departure when they will see him no longer. He needs to remind them and us, who do not see him either, that we must have him as our source of life. After his death and resurrection, they will need reminders that his life is available for them, and when flowing in them, will make them fruitful.

I wonder what impact the vine imagery will have for city dwellers? The preacher will have to decide if the image will speak to the congregation. What other, more relevant or contemporary image, will convey the same sense of connection to the life source? Would electricity be a modern equivalent? (Maybe that image is too mechanistic, lacking the liveliness of the vine, but you might want to play with it.) During Hurricane Fran, we in Raleigh lost electricity for six days. When electricity fails, all that is part of the daily life we in the developed nations are accustomed to shifts. When we lose electricity, we lose lights, refrigerators, electric stoves, microwaves, water pumps, dishwashers, fans and air-conditioning in the summer, heat in the winter, hot water, electric appliances etc. Food gets spoiled, drinks aren't cold, and hot food is out of the question. While there may be benefits to this forced slowing down in our hectic world, we do get a sense of how life limps along

when we lose connection to the source of our accustomed power.

Vine and branches suggest connectedness, and mutual flourishing . In a cover article for the "Sunday Times Magazine Section" a few years ago, Arlie Russell Hochschild studied the work habits of Americans for an upcoming book. We are all aware that Americans are working more and more hours per week and that this increase in working hours applies to both spouses. What is happening though is that these workers are making a home out of their work. A survey showed that people are not protesting these long work hours as much as we might think. In fact, 62% of those interviewed preferred their situation and 28% would even prefer more work! Nor are these workers taking advantage of opportunities offered in "family friendly " companies to take time off for a new birth, or to choose part time work. And it's not the poorest who aren't interested in shorter hours, but those with better jobs. Work seems to be becoming a place people would rather be at home.

What's happening at home? Higher divorce rates, seething tantrums of children, needs of elderly parents and the new "blendings" of step-parents and former in-laws. One quote by an employee tells it all, "I usually come to work early just to get away from the house." People sense they would get a better rating for their job performance at work than they would get at home. Thus, we may be distancing ourselves from the important work we must be doing at home, and "emotionally downsizing" our family time. The author suggested that we are becoming "emotional ascetics" at home. One book quoted in the article touches into today's gospel vine image. In, *WHEN THE BOUGH BREAKS: THE COST OF NEGLECTING OUR CHILDREN*, Sylvia Hewlett says, "today's children are more likely to underperform at school, commit suicide, need psychiatric help, suffer a severe eating disorder, take drugs, bear a child out of wedlock, be a victim of a violent crime."

We are disconnecting ourselves from one another, shortchanging the ones who are most important in our lives. But Jesus presents himself as the true vine; an image of connectedness, first of all to the him and then through him, to each other. Perhaps the One who does the pruning would have us look at what is a dead end in our lives and we need to prune away. Jesus was offering his listeners another chance to think about fruitfulness. Harvests, crops and fruits appear frequently in Jesus' parables. His audience knew what a crop meant--the difference between life and death. After all, farming was more than planting a back yard garden. Being fruitful meant eating for them, survival for their families. The image that Jesus is

proposing suggests that we must bear fruit by our connectedness to the Vine and each other, as members of that Vine. This fruitfulness will be life giving for ourselves and others. The community connected to the true Vine bears fruit and sustains life for its own members through its meaningful liturgical celebrations; its care for its elderly and sick members and its education of its young. This community might also be the difference between life and death for those who are hungry and homeless; for those who need a voice to protect them and speak on their behalf; for those in other countries who suffer from war and life-threatening diseases caused by poverty and the degradation of nature. If we stay connected to the true Vine we will think and act as he did, his very life flowing in us will make us more and more into a concerned community of his disciples.

The preacher might also speak of the community's ties to individual members. Notice how we separate ourselves from others. We see the differences; we divide ourselves into groups. In our parishes there are the "old timers" and the "newcomers"; the "conservatives" and the "liberals" etc. Jesus reminds us that being connected to him, connects us to each other, despite our differences. The welfare of some affects the welfare of us all. Prayers today in our petitions might be for unity in our church; for a common vision that improves the lot of all in our nation, especially during an election year, and a concern for those cut off from the mainstream of our lives, the least and neglected among us.

### QUOTABLE

In a word the mystery of God's love, which in our regard holds out reconciliation and at the end of the ages salvation, is the one thing which must be preached at every meal in which the holy bread is eaten and the cup of salvation drunk. Quite simply, expounding the biblical deliverance achieves this best. These books have no other message.

-----Gerard. Sloyan in, Worship, March 1987, p. 131.

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