

10 May 2009
John 15.1-8
B Easter 5 RCL

The Vineyard

Jesus said, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."

John 15:1-8

It must have been the crash that woke me up. I had finished dinner earlier in the evening with my family and then decided that I had better go back out to the vineyard. The grapes were heavy and close to harvest. I was afraid thieves would come in the night and steal them, and then all of my work would be for naught. So I said good-bye to my wife and went back out into the vineyard. It was a glorious and beautiful night. A Passover night; Passover was to be the following day. There was a full moon. It was so bright you could see everything--every little pebble in all the hills around. Down in the hollow the vines were luxuriant, strong, and vital; it was like a pool of blackness with only an occasional moonbeam that came through and lighted a part of it. It was warm--almost sultry and a lovely breeze came off the lake and cooled my face. From one minute it would come over there--and then suddenly it would mysteriously stop; then it would come from the opposite direction, like the spirit of God. A beautiful night!

I must have fallen asleep because I was startled by the sound. I woke up and looked over by the pile of dead branches that I had pruned that day, and I saw somebody picking himself up off the ground. He must have fallen over one of the branches. Ha! I was right--right to come down and guard my vineyard. The thieves were coming. I stayed where I was, crouched down by the rock because I wanted to see who was there. I looked out into the vineyard for other shadows. After a minute or so I could see that there

was nobody else--no movement in the vineyard, and nothing else around. So I turned my attention back to the pile of dead branches. The man was just standing there. He hadn't moved. After he picked himself up, he reached down and picked up one of the branches. It might have been the one he fell over. I thought to myself, "He's going to use it, make a club." But he didn't heft it in his hands like you do when you pick up a club. He held it in both his hands and cradled it almost like a baby; and then he turned a little bit and I could see his face--and it wasn't a man at all! It was just a boy no more than twelve or thirteen. As a matter of fact, it was one of the boys from our village, the strange one, the carpenter's son--the one who would be laughing and playing and dancing one minute with all the other children and then all of a sudden he was serious, quiet, and reflective, looking off into space as if he could see something we just can't see. That was the one, the carpenter's boy. What in the world was he doing out here?

He held the branch in his hand and then reached up, touched it, stroked it. It was almost as if he were caressing it. Then he turned and walked over to one of the vines. It might have been the very vine that I had pruned that branch from that day. He kneeled down and took the dead branch and held it up to the prune mark. He took both his hands and wrapped them around the dead branch and the stem of the vine and he held them together.

He must have stayed there at least a minute, over a minute, holding on, almost as if by force of will he could make the branch live again and be part of the vine. It was then that I decided that there was no danger and I came forward and walked up to him. He stood up and looked at me. He wasn't embarrassed, and I noticed that, as I looked at his hands, he had held onto the branch and the vine so hard that he had broken the skin. Blood smeared the branch and his hand. His blood glistened in the moonlight. He didn't say anything and somehow I felt, that for the first time in my life, I was really seeing him. I took him by the arm and walked over to a rock. We both sat down. I don't really know how to describe what happened. I just began to talk and we talked for hours. I guess I should say *I* talked. He mostly listened and said very little. It was so easy to talk to him. I know it sounds strange--a forty year old man--and he just a boy. But I told him about the vineyard and how important it is to me and how beautiful and mysterious the vines and the grapes are. I talked about how marvelous it is that a vine can take almost nothing, dirty ground water and nourishment from the soil and sunlight from the air and make new branches, new grapes and beautiful green leaves, and then beautiful lovely grapes, delicious grapes, heavy with life, nourishment and sweetness--heavy with the joy of God for man. He just smiled and looked at me and nodded his head as if he knew. I talked about the sadness that you feel when one of the branches dies, when for no reason it just refuses the life of the vine, turns brown, dry, and unfruitful and it has to be cut away. It seemed like a shadow crossed his face when I talked about that.

It must have been at least two hours later that he stood up and I knew he had to go home. He turned and waved and just walked away toward the village. After a couple of

seconds I decided to follow him to make sure that he was safe and got back to the village all right.

I followed behind him and he came to the edge of the vineyard, to the end of it. Then he did a strange thing--he stopped and turned to the vine. He reached up and plucked a small cluster of grapes and held it in his hand and then took his other hand and covered it. Then he gently squeezed and I could see the grape juice flow out between his fingers and run down over his arms, down his elbow and, drop by drop, fall into the dust of the ground. He stood there a moment and looked at his hands and murmured to himself, "Like blood, almost like blood." Then he did another strange thing; he backed up against the stem of the vine. Ha! He wasn't even tall enough to reach the top of the stem. He stretched his arms along the branches on either side and he looked at them. It was almost as if he were measuring himself against the vine. The blood of the grape dropped from his arms onto the ground. Then he dropped his arms and walked on into the village.

I forgot about it. Oh, for a couple of weeks after that, when I saw him, I would smile at him. But I guess I was a little embarrassed, was a busy man, had lots to do with the harvest, and soon the whole incident just went out of my mind and I didn't think about it again.

I didn't think about it until this morning, coming into Jerusalem.

This is the last time I will come to Jerusalem, the last time I will celebrate the Passover of our God in His holy city. I am an old man now and I know that I shall not see another Passover. So I came this last time to my favorite place, the vineyard outside the walls called Gethsemane, the holy place where grapes grow. Vines are beautiful. I crossed over the terrible place, the place of the skull, Golgotha; and I was able to see that they had done it again on the very day the Passover starts--

The Roman had crucified three men! As I walked by the crosses I looked up and I was stunned! A huge cross bore the carpenter's little son, Yeshua. What had he done to merit crucifixion? He was a good man. A little different and strange, but a good man. What had he done? He looked into my eyes, and I had to look away. I looked at his arms stretched out along the cross and I saw his blood welling up from the wounds in his hands and running down his arms and dripping down onto the ground, drop by drop, heavy, dark, turgid blood. It was then that I remembered that night. Even more startled I looked back into his eyes and then I knew that that night he had seen this day--that night he had seen this day.

I passed on by and came into the city. Tonight I sit here with my last Passover and every time I raise this cup of wine, the cup of blessing, to bless our God, I see in it his hands; from one of the hands drips, like on that night so long ago, the blood of the grape, drips into the chalice, and from the other hand drips his own blood. It, too, drops into the chalice.