

5 Easter
May 6, 2012
John 15: 1-8
The Rev. Amy Donohue-Adams

“I am the vine, you are the branches.
Those that abide in me and I in them bear much fruit”.

Blessed be the Name of God!

Several months ago Bill and I went on a field trip to the Forever Forest in Langley. This is a large parcel of land, 174 acres, on Peaceful Lane, off Lone Lake Road, quite near to our home. We were intrigued by the name and the opportunity to see this new trail on the island. We were not alone. Minutes after we arrived at the Putney trailhead, a blue Prius showed up and out popped Fletcher and Elizabeth Davis! They too were drawn to the Forever Forest and a new walk in the woods.

While our experience was not of a vineyard and a vinegrower, it was of roots and branches! And we did indeed meet an 84-year-old gentleman who has tended his forested property for years and years. We met a real forest grower! Mr. Case began by telling us that, when he was in his early teens, he went with his family on a trip into the Cascades and saw a forest that had been clear-cut. "I got disgusted," said Mr. Case. He vowed to own his own chunk of forestland that he could preserve. Young Mr. Case was markedly changed by experiencing the devastation of an over logged piece of property. He vowed to change that unfortunate situation by buying a piece of forest that he would personally learn to tend!

He knew nothing of forestry, of thinning trees, or selling timber but, by the trial and error method of self-education, dedication and pruning, he learned the necessary skills to keep the forest intact and growing. He still to this day thins the forest and even does annual small cuts that mimic natural blow downs. Mr. Case's property was logged around 1918 so the forest is second growth—alive and very healthy. It has a few larger trees, including one cedar estimated to be about 400 years old. Mr. Case now walks and shares the benefits of his life long labor of love.

More importantly, Mr. Case has put his long-term vow into law by placing the property into a conservation trust with the Whidbey Camano Land Trust. At no time in

the future can the land be developed, either by Case, his descendants or anyone to whom they may sell the property. Now he is assured that in the next 50 or 100 years, his “piece of forever” is still going to be a working forest! Mr. Case has a tangible, visible and lifelong ministry in the fruitful care of the earth! His has a ministry you can experience and see.

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In Langley, there is a group of women who get together for camaraderie, fellowship and the love of knitting. It is a very life-giving group of gals. While busy knitting, any and every topic is possible. We have talked about family returning to the island and family moving away. We share about difficulties at work, heartaches that need a voice, and family members that need special care. We make connections. And we have connections everywhere, as you all understand as happens on this island. When someone dies, you can well imagine someone knows him or her. When the three young men died in the terrible car accident several months ago, two of us who knit, had taught them. When Zippy died, one of us was her teacher! When WICA offered “Steel Magnolias”, one of us was in the show! We lean into one another’s moments with support and loving care.

We are connected to each other, to the community, to things that really matter. We share the bread of our lives, our newest knitting patterns and challenges, a glass of wine, our hopes for the development of downtown Langley and our life together in our little Yarn Shop! We bring who we are to each other and to our knitting group. We offer a safe haven. A piece of dark chocolate or licorice in a busy life. An extended hand. We welcome others into our circle, usually knitters but not necessarily so. We wait for each of us to share the simple, the complicated and even the complex patterns of our lives. We reach out in quiet and significant ways. We are not afraid of tears, hugs, and laugh out loud craziness. We are there for one another. When one of us is struggling, we bring a sense of community. When one of us has a particularly spiritual awakening, we listen

with our whole heart. When one of us is broken in spirit by the death of her husband, we offer the gift of yarn, the encircling yarn that binds us all together.

I do not know how this group of gals began, what brought our various colors and types of yarns and patterns together on a given Wednesday evening, only that we do gather with intention and commitment. We come together, we welcome others, we continue to reach out, and we creatively sustain our inter-connectedness. Yarn has brought us to a new place in each other's lives. Yarn has become the thread that knits us together. Yarn has touched us in the sacred places often unspoken.

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Today's gospel assures us that we can bear fruit, even if we don't have the proper words, even if we have been or are barren, fruitless, or scraggly with regard to spreading life to others. “You abide in me as I abide in you.” Our God gives us these words, keeps promises and will never leave us alone.

Jesus tells us his life will be ours. He tells us that we are knit together, that we are kindred spirits with him. He assures us that we share the same fruitfulness, reminding us that the vine and the branches must both be fruitful in order to bear much fruit! He shows us the broken places in need of mutual respect . . . then places us in these broken places to water, prune, feed, and welcome and at the same time, invites us to be watered, pruned, fed, and welcomed by others. He beckons us to look into one another's eyes and gently smile and cry together. He places us all in these very thin places where we can begin to break down the walls that separate us from one another so that we will become truly fruitful. This is the way of God. This is the way of the vinedresser. God's way yearns for the fruitfulness of the vine and the branches to bear more and more fruit together! Listen carefully . . .

There was a famous monastery that had fallen on very hard times. Formerly its many buildings were filled with young monks and its big church resounded with the singing of the chant. But now it was deserted. People no longer came there to be nourished by prayer. A handful of old monks shuffled through the cloisters and praised their God with heavy hearts.

On the edge of the monastery woods, an old rabbi had built a little hut. He would come there from time to time to fast and pray. No one ever spoke to him, but whenever he appeared, the word would be passed from monk to monk: the rabbi walks in the woods. And for as long as he was there, the monks would feel sustained by his prayerful presence.

One day the abbot decided to visit the rabbi and to open his heart to him. So, after the morning Eucharist, he set out through the woods. As he approached the hut, the abbot saw the rabbi standing in the doorway, his arms outstretched in welcome. It was as though he had been waiting there for some time. The two embraced like long lost brothers, then they stepped back and just stood there, smiling at one another with smiles their faces could hardly contain.

After a while the rabbi motioned the abbot to enter. In the middle of the room was a wooden table with the scriptures open on it. They sat there for a moment, in the presence of the Book. Then the rabbi began to cry. The abbot could not contain himself. He covered his face with his hands and began to cry too. For the first time in his life he cried his heart out. The two men sat there like lost children, filling the hut with their sobs and wetting the wood of the table with their tears.

After the tears had ceased to flow and all was quiet again, the rabbi lifted his head. “You and your brothers are serving God with heavy hearts,” he said. “You have come to ask a teaching of me. I will give you a teaching, but you can only repeat it once. After that, no one must ever say it aloud again.”

The rabbi looked straight at the abbot and said, “The messiah is among you.” For a while, all was silent. The rabbi said, “Now you must go”.

The abbot left without a word and without ever looking back.

The next morning, the abbot called his monks together in the chapter room. He told them he had received a teaching from “the rabbi who walks in the woods” and that this teaching is never again to be spoken aloud. Then he looked at each of his brothers and said, “The rabbi said that one of us is the messiah.”

The monks were startled by this saying. “What could it mean?” they asked themselves. “Is Brother John the messiah” or Brother Matthew? Or Brother Thomas? Am I the messiah? What could this mean?”

They were all deeply puzzled by the rabbi's teaching. But no one ever mentioned it again.

As time went by, the monks began to treat one another with a very special reverence. There was a gentle, wholehearted, human quality about them now, which was hard to describe but easy to notice. They lived with one another as men who had finally found something. But they prayed the scriptures together as men who were always looking for something. Occasional visitors found themselves deeply moved by the life of these monks. Before long, people were coming from far and wide to be nourished by the prayer life of the monks and young men were asking, once again, to become part of the community.

In those days, the old rabbi no longer walked in the woods, his hut had fallen into ruins. But, somehow or other, the old monks who had taken his teaching to heart still felt sustained by his prayerful presence.

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Because the vine lives, so do the branches. In order for us to bear more fruit, it is necessary that Jesus' commandment of love gradually express itself more and more visibly in our lives. Our life in Jesus has to be easy to see and quick to notice! So, take time, look around you, and hear the old rabbi whisper, “The Messiah is in our midst. The Messiah is in our midst!” Then, wherever you are, be the best fruit bearing branch you can be!

My brothers and sisters, this is today's gospel message!

Blessed be the name of God!