

Easter V, April 29 2018. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland WA.
Nigel Taber-Hamilton. Part of Pelagius' letter to Celantia, 1 John 4:7-21; John 15: 1-8

Some of you will recall me mentioning something that child psychologists talk about when it comes to messaging with children, namely that it takes 15 positive messages to a child to overcome one negative message. The same is true, I believe, when it comes to reading the bible! Today is a perfect example – there's all this positive messaging about being connected to the vine, and one negative message – withered branches are burned. I noticed this phenomenon in many of biblical commentaries on this passage – lots of focus on the core threat about burning branches!

So let me ask you a question: are you feeling 'withered' today?! Are you feeling guilty, today? Does that passage in John's gospel about the withered branch make you nervous that you haven't lived up to the high standards proposed by Jesus (at least as John describes him)? The consequences are dire, after all. Personally, I view this threat as rather like burning wood early on a rainy day; its inevitable smoke obscures the glories of the rising sun.

Why did John include this bit about the burning? John wanted to energize his community; maybe reflecting on dire consequences would do that, he must have thought. The effectiveness of "threat as a tool" shouldn't be underestimated! It's not a core truth of faith, but we can make it so. The pity is that John ruined a perfectly good metaphor about vine and branches with that threatening image!

I wonder if this John – the Gospel writer – realized how damaging the invocation of fear could be for his community? We human beings seem to have a knack of using fear to manipulate each other, and we do it well, and often, because we've discovered that if you can make a person fearful its much easier to control and manipulate them. Hermann Goering once said that manipulating a whole population is actually very easy: "*All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism, and exposing the country to greater danger.*" Be afraid. Be very afraid. They're coming for you and yours....if we don't do something to keep them out, keep them away.....

Our focus on threat and fear is so very human! And it does have a place. When the threat is genuine, then fear is a stimulant to self-preservation. We learned that in our bones when we were hunter-gathers millennia ago. When it comes to these two ugly experiences, we seem to have a corner on the market! It's as if we can never see the glass-half-full, as if we've allowed others to put blinders on us!

We've learned that threat – real or invented – can be used to create fear. In our age this is particularly so. Now we need to learn to distinguish between a genuine threat and a fake threat. For instance, it's good to see climate change as a threat, just as long as we don't allow ourselves to be paralyzed by it. **And** it's good, in response to a genuine threat, to allow ourselves to be fearful, just as long as we don't allow that fear to paralyze us. **In the end, to flourish we have to embrace threat and fear not as rulers of who we are but as guides directing us to who we want to be.** In that context, we can hear the gospel writer's metaphor as an invitation rather than

a condemnation.

The other side of consigning the reality of fear to its appropriate place is to ask ourselves what a healthier response might be in this pilgrimage we call life. For that, we have some help elsewhere in today's readings.

Putting fear in its appropriate places is exactly what the other John (the author of the letters, not the author of the gospel) invites us to do, instead reminding us of the most productive, effective way of living together: "perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment....."

Yes, let's relegate fear to its appropriate place, and focus on the other part of the metaphor of the vine and the branches. The branches survive AND thrive because they're connected to the vine. **When we're connected with the vine, we flourish.**

Have you ever seen a vine with only one branch? When I was at the Diocese of California's conference and retreat center in Sonoma County a few years ago I used to get up at 6am and walk in the surrounding vineyards. No such thing as a vine with only 1 branch! If you look up a description of a grapevine (did, on the Sonoma County's extension website) you get something like this: A grapevine is made up of a trunk, then usually two thick branches (called "cordons") trained to go off in opposite directions perpendicular to the trunk. From these two cordons there are other, smaller branches, called "arms," which grow upward, and from them yet more branches called shoots grow. From the shoots the grape bunches grow. Lots of different branches, all connected to the trunk!!

That's a powerful community metaphor! Different sorts of branch each with its own role, all connected to each other, all with the common goal of bearing fruit! Only if we're all committed to each other in our separate roles, focused on our common work of proclaiming the coming kingdom of God – and all the things and people that means – only if we allow the fullness of divine energy to flow in and through us, will we bear fruit.

The way that this divine energy is expressed according to the psalmist is in compassionate love toward all creation, and especially those in need. **God's sovereignty is made perfect in loving and inclusive relationships.** There it is again: love! What, after all, is authentic community but a network of loving and inclusive relationships?

The letter-writing John understood all this. He clearly grasped the way that the powerful among us use fear as a tool to manipulate and control, and he understood, too, what always – always – combats that fear: love. **Love, not power, is the primary defining characteristic for God, and so love, not power, should be our defining characteristic too.**

True love is transformative; it's not passive. That's what the Celtic monk Peligius was saying in his letter to Celantia. Authentic community isn't about acting out of fear, where we simply try and avoid certain behaviors; living in love is active. Living in love – truly living in it, not simply expressing words of support about it but also acting on those words with compassion in relationship – truly living in love is the core of community, the core of the Body of Christ.

Being that community means allowing God's love to flow to and through us; as we do that, we learn to love, and as we love, we share in God's loving and healing power. Those who are loved must let love flow through themselves – ourselves – to the vulnerable and poor, to the sick and the lost, to all who – in the words of our prayers – journey from health to illness, from hope to despair, from consolation to grief, from love to loneliness, from faith to doubt.

One last thought, about bearing fruit. Yes, that fruit is about an outward-focusing way of living; yes it's about an authentic, loving community, about living each other. Lest we forget, however, the great commandments are to love God and your neighbor *as yourself*. You can't love God without loving yourself. You can't love your neighbor without loving yourself. We can only bear the fruit that is love if part of that fruit is for us, too.

Compassionate love is an intentional spiritual value that we're invited to exercise. It will transform us as individuals and as a community if we allow it. It is, truly, one of the gifts of God for the people of God; a holy gift that will help us to be holy people.....if we allow it. May it be so!