



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea THE FIFTH SUNDAY
The Episcopal Church OF EASTER
in Destin, Florida APRIL 28, 2024

A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham

Jesus' audience in the first century would have heard his parable of the vineyard very differently than we do some 2000 years later. Jesus was speaking to a people. Today we hear the parable speaking to us as individuals. There are good explanations for both. And both are valuable to us.

The more familiar interpretation that focuses on individual behavior suggests we would be wiser to be like the branch of the vine that remains connected to the vine, the vine's being Jesus Christ in the popular interpretation, as invoked by the metaphor Jesus himself used:

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.

More to the point:

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.

Not a pleasant prospect, but one that awaits those who talk the talk, but fail to walk the walk. Those who disconnect from or disassociate with Jesus, the true vine, and become withered and useless, bearing no fruit. A worthy and worthwhile interpretation to be sure.

But there is a deeper and broader message, as well. Jesus' first century Jewish audience would have known their Bible. When Jesus mentioned the vineyard, they would have recalled the fifth chapter of Isaiah (Is. 5:7) and the prophet's words:

For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts
is the house of Israel...

For the prophet Hosea (10:1), "Israel is a luxuriant vine."

And the psalmist (80:8) sang:

You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the
nations and planted it.

The vine had become the symbol of the nation of Israel. Moreover, it had become of a degenerate Israel, as reflected in the words of the prophet Jeremiah (2:21):

Yet I planted you as a choice vine,
from the purest stock.
How then did you turn degenerate
and become a wild vine?

In using the image of a vineyard, therefore, Jesus was calling out the nation of Israel, or, by then, just the people of Israel, as Rome had conquered and occupied the nation of Israel before the time of Christ. So more is involved here than individual behavior.

Just as the prophets had done so often in the past, Jesus was speaking to a nation. He was calling a nation back to God. Furthermore, the people of Israel may have been children of Abraham and chosen by God to reveal God to creation, but that status gained them nothing. Such external qualifications were ineffectual and meaningless to God.

What would Jesus say to our nation today? What would he say to us as nominal Christians? What would Jesus say to us as Episcopalians? What would Jesus say to us as the community of St. Andrew's By-the-Sea?

Is our conduct as a nation, a religious group, a denomination, or a local church community, wild or degenerate or ... righteous? Is our conduct motivated by greed, fear, or the lust for power or status? Or are we governed by Jesus' insistence on loving God and loving our neighbor? Do we demand justice tempered by mercy? Is peace paramount? Or another way to state this...who would crucify Jesus today?

The leaders of the Temple enlisted the Romans to crucify Jesus because Jesus threatened their political power. But only the Roman occupiers had the power to crucify, so Jewish leaders had to turn to Pilate, as the emissary of the Roman emperor to have Jesus crucified.

Who today would enlist the power of government to crucify Jesus? Who would be so threatened by Jesus' message of love, compassion, peace, justice, and mercy? Who would resist feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring

for the sick, welcoming the stranger, or treating prisoners humanely? If we elect or support them, are we culpable? Something to ponder.

What would Jesus say to us as Christians or as a nominally or supposedly Christian community, culture, or nation? Are we righteous or wild and degenerate or corrupt? Have we heard Jesus' prophetic teaching? Have we connected to the true vine and invited Christ to abide in us? Or are we pummeled by distractions and desires that dull Christ's presence and obstruct his impact in our hearts? Does Christ abiding in our hearts show in our attitudes and conduct?

Isn't it great to be an Episcopalian? All questions. All the time. But questions that we must confront and answer. Preferably before Jesus returns and holds us accountable... "gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned." (John 15:___).

Let's remember that in our tradition as Episcopalians, we place heavy reliance on an "informed" conscience in making moral and ethical decisions. And by informed we mean studied in Scripture, tradition, and reason, which includes our experience, especially our experience of Christ's abiding in our hearts. After all, if our conscience is not informed, we can rationalize just about anything.

Recall this exchange from the 1983 motion picture *The Big Chill* (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0085244/quotes/>):

Michael: I don't know anyone who could get through the day without two or three juicy rationalizations. They're more important than sex.

Sam Weber: Ah, come on. Nothing's more important than sex.

Michael: Oh yeah? Ever gone a week without a rationalization?

Maybe we should ask, ever gone a week without going to church? Ever gone a day without a few moments of prayer? Ever gone a meal without first thanking God?

