

Sermon Says: Fifth Sunday of Easter, April 29
Deacon Tom Baker at 5 pm and 8:30 am Masses

Finding words and images to describe God isn't easy,
since God isn't like anything else that we know.
For example, despite the way we talk about God sometimes,
God isn't a human being, for which we can only say, thank God,
the last thing we need would be a God
with as many faults as most of us human beings have.
Even Jesus had to use different images
to find the right words to tell people who God is,
and what the relationship between God and us is actually like.

He tried different things.
Sometimes he said God was like a shepherd, taking care of us,
which at times is what we need to know,
but it's only part of the story,
especially because the idea of us being sheep isn't very inspiring or accurate.
Sometimes Jesus said God was like a king,
and we're the servants entrusted with his property,
which also describes something about what the relationship is like,
except that the king in those images always seems to be going off on a journey,
leaving us on our own to figure out what he wants done in his absence.
So again, not the whole story of the way God really is with us.

But today in this gospel there is another image,
and it's one that takes some work on our part to focus on.
In today's gospel we're at the end of Jesus's life,
and he is trying to describe for his very worried disciples
what life with God is going to be like after Jesus leaves this earth.
He is trying to get across that there is still going to be a close relationship,
with real life and connection still flowing through it,
and so he says that he is a vine, and we are the branches.

And if we're honest, our first reaction might be that this isn't a perfect image either.
We are not agricultural people,
there's a survey that says that 20% of young people have never seen a real cow,
so isn't this one of those ancient images that need to be updated so we can *get* them.

So you know, I tried to think of one, something more contemporary than a plant
to show us what Jesus was trying to get across.
I thought about a power grid, terrible idea.
I thought about a computer network, and that was even worse.

In the end, you can't update this one.
It *has* to be a vine, because the real point of the image
is not just the vine, but the fruit.
That's the heart of this gospel.
The vine Jesus tells us we are is *connected*, but it also *produces*.

For hundreds of years before Jesus,
the Jewish scriptures said that what God is looking for in this world
is for people to produce good fruit.
We're told the first thing God created was a garden,
and the fruit God is looking for is what ought to come out of a garden,
things that give life.
And God hasn't been vague,
God has spelled out for us what that fruit is,
justice for people who need it,
the good things of this world handed out generously,
the oppressed taken care of when the world turns against them.
And nothing disappointed God more in those scriptures,
than people who were given everything they needed to produce this fruit
and then didn't.

And now Jesus makes this image of the fruit and the vineyard even more intense,
we aren't just taking care of some vines,
we *are* one, connected with God.
We are one organism with God,
the relationship between God and us is now that close,
God wants to give us that much power.
So we cooperate and participate in what God is trying to do with us,
we grow, we keep moving, we push out, we produce fruit.
And in God's eyes, a vine that produces, there is just nothing more glorious than that.

But being a branch on God's vine isn't always easy.
If you've ever seen a real vineyard in the winter,
it seems shockingly bare and empty.
The pruning Jesus talks about in this reading can look very drastic.
If you're a vine, with some regularity your branches get cut back to almost nothing
and it looks like nothing is happening.
And Jesus's image of the vine is so perfect for the way life actually is,
because we are people who are constantly needing to cut away whatever is sapping our energy,
everything that stands in the way.
Sometimes we even know what needs cutting in our lives,
and it's always shocking how hard it is to do it, how much we resist,
even when we realize that cutting away something we need to leave behind
is God's work for us right now.

But the message for us today is that we are not on our own with this work.
We're part of a system, with one another and with God.
We are already so connected with God we can hardly grasp it.
God is trying to grow us, push us out,
help us to cut away whatever we have tied ourselves up with,
God wants the fruit he has been trying to get people to produce
for thousands of years.
Only you know what kind of fruit you can produce,
it might be spectacular, it might be something that on the face of it seems ordinary.
God wants change and growth for us, even when we don't.
If God didn't want that
he wouldn't tell us to see ourselves like the branches of a vine.
As soon as we realize that's what we are,
the fruit won't be far behind.