

Pastor Kevin Garman

Theme: The Vineyard

Scripture: John 15:1-8

May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2021

“Gospel of John’s Wisdom: The Vineyard”

Prayer

Unlike earthly kings,  
you, O Lord, are ever steadfast and faithful.  
You sent us your Son, Jesus the Christ,  
to rule over us, not as a tyrant,  
but as a gentle shepherd.  
Keep us united and strong in faith,  
that we may always know your presence in our lives,  
and, when you call us home,  
may we enter your heavenly kingdom  
where you live and reign for ever and ever. Amen.

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Scripture Prayers for the RCL, Vanderbilt Divinity Library.

In this next sermon series up until the Day of Pentecost, we will be looking at the wisdom of the Gospel of John. The Gospel of John was my favorite gospel growing up. Although they share similar stories, the Gospel of John differs from the other synoptic gospels in such profound ways revealing new insights to old stories told through a different lens. The Gospel reading of John today focuses on the vineyard and the vine. Jesus speaks about a vineyard being tended by the vinegrower to help the vine stalks and their shoots stay healthy and strong. A theme we can glean from this parable is the theme of doubt and love. Doubt and love go hand-in-hand at times, but our scriptures for today speak to us about the complexity of love with its relationships to our doubts and questions.

The Book of Acts told us a story today about the conversion of an Ethiopian eunuch whom Philip helps convert. Philip hears the beckons of the Holy Spirit and goes on a specific road leading from Jerusalem to Gaza. Philip encounters another traveler on the road who is an Ethiopian eunuch who is an important official in the court of Candace, an Ethiopian Queen. The eunuch is reading the scroll of Isaiah and is entirely confused by its content. Philip sees the confusion of the young scholar and he asks if he needs some help interpreting the meaning of Isaiah 53:7-8. They answer further questions and must have had a wonderful conversation because the eunuch sees water, most likely a body of water no larger than a puddle, and asks to be baptized by Philip. Philip obliges and the story ends with Philip preaching the good news to all those he encountered on his journey to Caesarea.

Doubt and love are expressed through questions in this story. The Ethiopian eunuch is humble enough to ask Philip for help realizing this text is beyond his understanding. Philip helps interpret and builds a relationship with this man to show him the love of the gospel. Their conversation back and forth discerning the intent and purpose of the Isaiah 53:7-8 with follow up questions led Philip to baptizing him on the side of the road. Doubt and love are inextricably bound together in the cycles of our faith journey by asking questions and seeking answers.

Psalms 22:25-31 describes a meal of thanksgiving celebrating love by sharing a meal, but this is only a snippet of the story the psalmist is attempting to express. Do not forget this is the Psalm Jesus quotes at the crucifixion, but he quotes this psalm because it is a message of love, doubt, and liberation. The opening sections of this psalm speak of someone in deep pain and lamentation questioning if they could even count on the God of their ancestors because everything seems so bleak and detestable at the moment. The psalmist reminds us it is God's love that brings us strength in the storms of life and our suffering, although inevitable, is also only temporary. Through God's love, God hears the cry of this psalmist facing difficulty and God is described as filling them to their fullest. As we can see, God builds relationships up through love and relationships are a way we build the kingdom of God from the bottom up.

The excerpt read in 1 John 4:7-21 is more of our traditional Biblical understanding of love. This type of love is described as being a part of our being in the image of God, love is the life of Jesus, love is meant to be for one another, and love is God allowing those to remain in God to remain in the presence of love. This passage is certainly comforting to the ear and formational to our theological conceptions of God, but it does seem to express itself in a rather unrealistic understanding of love at face

value, unless you look to the context of 1 John. 1 John is written more like a sermon than a letter. It is addressing this community's doubts and questions about their faith. The Johannine community was a separate community from the other Christian communities. The Johannines are often thought of as more Gnostic in their teachings than Platonic. The people of this community are clearly beginning to doubt their specific interpretation and John uses this opportunity to remind them of that love is the new commandment as Jesus talks about in the Gospel of John (John 13). Let's look at today's gospel lesson from John to understand love and doubt in the parable of the vineyard.

#### John 15:1-8

In the section leading up to this excerpt of John 15:1-8, Jesus is responding to the doubt of the disciples. Throughout John's gospel, John's focus on Jesus' ministry is what comes after Jesus' ministry as the Kingdom of God is brought forth by the Holy Spirit. Chapter 13 begins a section where Jesus is specifically revealing who he is as the Messiah to the disciples. This section of John tells the Last Supper story of John's gospel, it speaks about Jesus washing the feet of the disciples, Jesus gives the disciples the new commandment of love, and Jesus proclaims the Holy Spirit will follow him in his death to guide the disciples through the work of the gospel. Just before our excerpt in chapter 15, Jesus fields four questions from the disciples known as the four questions of John's gospel. First, Peter asks Jesus why he can't follow Jesus to wherever he is going, Thomas follows up with a question about where the final destination of Jesus is, Philip asks Jesus to show him God, and Judas asks Jesus why Jesus is only going to reveal himself as the Messiah to the disciples instead of the world. Jesus tells them about the Holy Spirit and then speaks these words.

#### John 15:1-8

"15 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. <sup>2</sup>He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. <sup>3</sup>You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. <sup>7</sup>If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup>My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."

Verse 1 sets the context of our relationship of doubt and love and the helps us understand this relationship through verses 2-5. God is the vinegrower who tends to our needs and daily pruning. God prunes each and every branch to bear more fruit. Since we have been cleansed, we know the word of God to be true and spoken to us through the Holy Spirit, so we know God abides in us and we abide in God. The vine is the image of God and our communal relationship with God. Thus, those who live into the image of God within themselves will bear much fruit in their lives as they journey in faith. Our doubt is not what God is pruning, but our doubt is what helps God prune us into a healthy, vibrant vine.

God promises us through this process of pruning we will be more fruitful than before, which is a reminder of our Divine blessing as God blessed all creation at the end of each day. However, those who abide with God will bear much fruit as they prune and strengthen their understanding of what it means to become a disciple. This analogy is not only an analogy of doubt and love, but it is an analogy of discipleship. Being a disciple of Jesus is all about our doubt and our responses to those doubts and fears.

Doubt is a natural part of life. Many of us doubt things our entire lives whether it be a career choice, where you live, some of the relationships and friendships you've built over the years, marriages, life decisions, and the list goes on and on of the various things we doubt in life. Doubt is only natural, and I do not believe Jesus is ever attempting to dissolve doubt within our lives. Simply look at the way Jesus responds to the disciple's questions and doubting his word by reminding them of past lessons and reminding them to look within themselves to find the answers to their questions as the image of God abides within them. Doubt is a natural aspect of our faith.

Love is just as much natural and more often far more emotionally pleasing than any other emotion doubt ever brings us, but love is often far more complex than the feel-good passages we often share with one another when we speak about love. Love is found after one heals from a deep-seeded pain as the psalmist reminds us. Love is found after we seek out revelation and find the answers we have been looking for as portrayed in the conversion of the eunuch. Love is found by looking to our community of friends and believers whom we look to for support, empowerment, and encouragement. Love is found in our questions and doubts of life because God is Love and God never abandons us.

Doubt and love go hand-in-hand. Without one the other never changes or develops. Love is complex and multifaceted just like the problems of our world. Just as 1 John says, God is Love! If we are to believe this and most importantly, live this

message of the gospel, then we must learn to doubt and ask questions to ensure we are bringing forth the healing powers of the gospel of transformation and liberation. We must ask questions to challenge positions of power and leaders just like Jesus did. We must ask questions to deepen our understanding of the complexity of our faith. Our questions may not give us the answer we seek or give us an answer at all, but our faith and our hope is that God prunes us to make us better, fuller versions of ourselves, not because we are need of punishment or discipline, but because God is inviting us to participate in the Gospel. Asking questions and living into our doubts are just as Biblical as the concept of Love.

In conclusion, my challenge to you is to become comfortable in a place of doubt and questioning. Love does not mean we simply stay the way we always are. Love does not mean we constantly change. However, love does mean just as the vinegrower, we look after those in our community to prune one another from our shortcomings and failures as we bring about the Kingdom of God on earth through the Gospel's message of liberation, transformation, and peace! Let us be the vinegrower when we help water, give sunlight, replant, or prune ourselves and others. Let us be the shoots of the vines leading us to new paths and new destinations as we journey through ministry together. Let us remind ourselves we are the vine just like Jesus who born into the image of God just like us, who suffered great tragedies in life as a human and as the Divine, and Jesus encountered and experienced love just like we did, so may we be reminded our doubts and our love are all intertwined in the image of God. God has not, is not, and will not forsake us. Amen.