

Easter 5b 2021  
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC  
The Rev. Catherine L. Tatem  
May 2, 2021

Acts 8:26-40   Psalm 22:24-30   1 John 4:7-21   John 15:1-8

Jesus “I am” statement today is that he is the vine, God is the vine grower, and the people of God the branches. A fact of gardening (as expressed by pastor David Lose) is that “sometimes you cut a bush or vine back until it looks nearly like a barren stalk precisely so that new growth is possible.” (DavidLose.net) How do you hear those words about pruning? I have heard them used as a punishment, a reminder that God is in charge and that God will correct, prune us into shape, into good behavior, or ... something. What I hear right now is **promise**; that “God can and will take what is most challenging in our lives and use it to prepare us for service.” (also DavidLose.net, 4/2021) I found out this week that a friend and colleague’s 28-year old son died about a week ago of an unexpected seizure. His parents lost their only son. Their dreams for today and for the future are shattered beyond recognition. The father describes that he and his wife are “wrecked.” They are hurting beyond measure. God did not prune these parents or this family so that they could grow. God, whose very being is Love, is holding their son, weeping with the family over the world in which death is a reality. I, in fact, have been pruned at this time. Without pushing the analogy too far, I feel cut in spirit, but not faith. This is grief. I know that God will use this loss in and through the ministry to which God has called me. This sorrow will help me minister to this family and to others. I have the painful reminder that abiding and pruning are hard work.

Imagine that we at Redeemer are one interconnected vine with all of God’s vines/creation. Being so grafted and connected influences how we live and grow. Being interconnected this past fourteen months has been a tremendous challenge. Our ministry together had not gotten much beyond “hello” when our world changed in a significant way. We still gather without seeing one another’s faces. We continue following guidelines from outside of these walls; guidelines from our bishop, community, and state. Abiding in Christ through a pandemic is a challenge for all of us. I felt relief when it seemed that ministry changed every few days instead of every few hours. I thought that I was a laying-on of hands, being with people type of priest. Redeemer is a “we hug everyone” kind of place. At a time when the world around us changes, we count on the church to be there for us, that we can participate in it in the way that we always have. With the church’s careful, cautious approach, to our like or dismay, our “usual” was taken away. This looked like a different vine ...

We have truly been in a desert place and encouraged to lean into our sense of loss, to find our way to “the bottom,” to the place that we can truly find and fully rely on God. The Israelites – like us, perhaps? – found God, let God go, manufactured god-likenesses, grumbled even when they were fed. God never left them. God has never left us. As we emerge from pandemic time, we have a renewed opportunity to deal with our senses of loss, and an opportunity to grow stronger as we graft more strongly onto the vine of Jesus the Christ. I am so excited to start meeting with you – in your homes, in my home, in small groups (without masks one day!), inside and outside. Let’s not lose our practice of worshipping God, finding and experiencing God in new places. Let’s leave behind anything in ourselves that keeps us from healing, from getting to

know one another in a rector/parish relationship to which we committed and that is filled with God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. We are so loved!

I ask you also to open your hearts to know that worshippers in this state and throughout the country need your witness to Jesus Christ while many are still unable to gather by choice or by decree, gather only in small groups outside. We still bury loved ones. Know that you are receiving the body of Christ on behalf of your brothers and sisters, all beloved children of God – and that we are all fed in Christ through word and sacrament.

We have other opportunities coming our way: this month's newsletter includes a spiritual education program for us to undertake. The diocese has invited us to participate in a program of reconciliation, and one that I am very excited about – a process to help us have hard conversations. We need to learn to be able to strip away our pride, insecurity, ego, indifference – whatever it is that keeps us grumbling and not submitting to God. It is through the very hardest conversations that we will invite God into our community and allow God to take what is most challenging in wounded selves and strengthen us for service. Our way forward is together in prayer, honesty, and abiding deeply in the true vine.

With me, pray for the church, on page 816 of the *Book of Common Prayer*:

Gracious Father, we pray for thy holy Catholic Church. Fill it with all truth, in all truth with all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in any thing it is amiss, reform it. Where it is right, strengthen it; where it is in want, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of Jesus Christ thy Son our Savior. *Amen.*