

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

Before my wife Gale retired a decade ago, she was a schoolteacher. She taught first grade for 37 years over in Mattydale, with a new crop of six-year-olds each year. They came to her classroom from a variety of family arrangements, from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, from several different ethnic and racial heritages, from different religious faiths, and from all sorts of “upbringing”. But no matter who they were, these precious little ones, it was always Gale’s intent that they should feel that they “belonged” in her classroom. She wanted them to feel at home there. She wanted them to feel included there. This classroom would be their home for eight hours a day, a place where they were expected to be, and she wanted them to look forward to that time spent in this familiar space. “Belonging” in Gale’s classroom was less a matter of entitlement than it was a sense of ownership. Each child shared ownership of this temporary home, and in a sense, a place in this classroom family.

So, each child was asked to agree to a task which would be supportive of their shared space and experience. Some checked to make sure the computers were turned off at the end of the school day. Others made sure the books were returned to the bookcases. Others watered the classroom plants or turned off the lights when the class went to lunch, and so on. And when it came time to gather on the little carpet in the corner for story-time or class meetings, each child had a specific place, a place all their own, which was mutually agreed upon and respected by all. If they were taller, they agreed that a place in the back would be best, for example, but they each had a place. Each belonged. Not one of the children really needed to feel cut-off from the others or feel alienated or lonely. Each was a cherished ‘branch of the vine’ in Gale’s classroom, and she made it a priority that they should know it and remember it.

The life and times and religious situation of the early Christians was a stormy sea. In the various little faith communities which sprung up around the eastern Mediterranean region, there were random persecutions, different ethnicities and languages, a variety of unique church customs and traditions emerged, disagreements about belief structure and authority, and any number of problems which threatened to pull these little churches apart. And the people hoped and prayed that Jesus would reappear to calm the storm. Tossed about by the stormy seas of uncertainty, the early Christians wondered just who “belonged”, who was in and who was out, who was faithful and who wasn’t. It was during this period that the Gospel of St. John was written and the three surviving pastoral letters attributed to him were composed. And John’s message to those emerging churches was, as Leslie reads this morning, “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” Everyone who loves, belongs. Everyone who is capable of loving, shares a dwelling with all the other children of God. Abiding with God means receiving the gift of ownership, owning the faith which is rooted in love, and being a healthy branch on the true vine.

In John’s letters to the early churches, he is fond of saying that we are “children of God”. John was a personal favorite of Jesus back in the day, and had heard Jesus first-hand refer to children as the model of faithfulness. Being children of God means that, despite all our diverse backgrounds, we each have a place where we belong on that carpet over in the corner, where we can meet together in peace and hear the stories which are rooted in love. We can abide with one another in peace, respecting the dignity and value of each, loving what God loves. Taught by God’s Holy Spirit, we have

come to discern that all people are children of God, no matter their race, gender, language, nationality, religion or lack of it. All belong, for all are God's children. Sadly, not all recognize or admit this basic fact. Some would even deny it outright. And the result, I fear, is the chaos of loneliness and disappointment, of disrespect and hatefulness, of despair and alienation. John's teaching, straight from the mouth of Jesus himself, is that "those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also." Friends, we need to take ownership of that teaching.

How much more unlike the early apostles could one be than the eunuch described in our reading this morning from the Book of Acts? Here is a man from Ethiopia, clearly a different racial background from the Judeans in Jerusalem. An African man of some apparent wealth and prestige since he is an official of the Ethiopian royal court. A foreigner who has no affiliation with the Jewish faith, let alone the new ways of Jesus. And yet, God's Holy Spirit wicks the deacon Philip away to meet him on the road as he is leaving town. Apparently God hopes Philip can demonstrate to him that he, too, is a child of God, that he, too, is a branch of the vine. As surprising as it was to the Apostles, such foreigners were often receptive to the idea that they belonged, too. The book of Acts of the Apostles is littered with such stories. God's children didn't need to have been born Jewish, or know the words of the prophets or the commandments of Moses, but somehow they all belonged, too. Perhaps they didn't even know God's name, or hadn't yet had their personal moment with Christ, but if they were capable of love, they, too, had a place reserved for them on the holy carpet.

From the fertile soil of creation a vine grows and is nourished by God's essence, by God's love. It is strong and healthy enough to withstand the winds of ravaging storms and the cold-heartedness hostility of the wintry world. And John recalls it as one of several ways by which Jesus told him about his mission and ministry. John remembers in his Gospel how Jesus used the image of a shepherd, of the light of the world, the bread of life, and this true vine to describe himself. Christ, he says, is the vine, and we are the branches. And despite all the hardships, we grow to be fruitful together. We belong on the vine. All human beings, all children of God, are nourished from the same source, and all have ownership of the fruit of the vine. A vine, by nature, entwines its growth, wrapping each branch or shoot together in a tightly conversant plant, protecting each other and making a common presence. Oh, sure, sometimes for the health of the vine, some errant branch or two which simply refuse love's nourishment need to be cut off. And occasionally some six-year-old has to be sent to the principal's office. But the opportunity for belonging is eternal. And the prospect of bearing good fruit together is our common joy.

This vine which Jesus describes for us in John's Gospel has often been used as a metaphor for the Christian Church, since its branches might be identified as the various branches and understandings of our faith. That may, in fact, be a useful image, but it might miss the more important point that the unity of the vine, the one for which God is the vintner, depends on the inclusion of all people. If the vine is truly one which grows out of love for all of God's children, out of God's own essence, then it must not be limited by doctrine or prejudice. Love knows no exclusion. Love is not reserved for any faction. Through this vine, diversity is recognized as unity. Despite how that sounds, it is not a conundrum nor an enigma. All diversity grows from the same roots, and finds its identity in common nourishment. All diversity takes ownership in the healthy production of common fruit. In the vine, all branches are gathered into one life, and those who are joined together by God, let no one threaten to put asunder. Amen.