

John 15:1-8 – Christina Smerick

Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22:25-31; I John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

The passages from John and 1 John always make me nervous. In both, there is suggested a kind of test, an outward showing of an inward state: are we producing fruit? Are we loving each other? And as a person who constantly worries that she is not doing enough, performing well enough, I read these passages initially the way I used to read Kierkegaard's stuff on the leap of faith: with a sinking sensation and a sneaking suspicion that I will not be able to live up to this. Believe on the strength of the absurd? Produce fruit or perish? Love or be an enemy of God? These dichotomies really do put the fear of God in me, and then 1 John tells me that such fear is a further sign of my failure to be a true branch of the vine that is Jesus! Such a reading leads quickly to despair. Or worse—in those of us who are driven by performance anxiety, it can lead to a 'fake it til we make it' mentality, by which we decide that if we're just nice enough, patient enough, if we can just act like we're loving others, that we'll avoid getting pruned. But we still have a sense that the graft didn't take; that we're hanging on by a thread, if that, that maybe indeed we are not of the true vine at all. In me, this anxiety stems from the many many times I asked Jesus into my heart upon my first initiation into Protestant evangelicalism. You all have heard this often enough from me: that the change I expected to wash over me, didn't; that my heart was not strangely warmed; that I never felt it 'took', that the graft happened. And if we stop here, with this kind of reading of John and 1 John, then I think we have cause to be anxious.

But such a reading may not be the best reading. There are other themes present here than the one I naturally gravitate to—the one that makes me feel like crud. The first theme is what I'm gonna call "God First".

Themes: God First

1. "You did not choose me but I chose you" (John)
2. "This is love; not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for us." (1 John)

Now I know that this can sound a little Calvinistic, but the good kind of Calvin, the kind that even current Calvinists fail to emphasize I think, and that is the always-already of God's presence and love. In both the Gospel passage and the first letter of John, there is a strong emphasis upon the firstness of God; that what makes me of the vine, what indeed enables me to love in the first place, is the loving choosing of God, not my own powers or abilities. Often, this kind of idea gets emphasized via sin—that we are helpless without God's grace, to steal a line from the Act of Contrition. Rather than thinking about it as a stain that cannot be removed except via the scouring power of God's love (this is what I think of when I hear that "Washed in the blood of the

lamb” song, after I think “ewww”), perhaps we should take the gardening metaphor in John seriously, and see it as a preparation of the soil in which we may take root. We can love, we can take root, because God in Christ prepares the ground for us. Rather than a test that a neutral God sets up for us, to see if we can pass, these passages remind us that we do not have a neutral God, a silent judge who is impartial, but we have a loving God, who chose His creation in making it, who judged it “good” from the get-go, and who actively nurtures and prepares us for doing His work in the world.

Which leads me to my second theme, that of growth and organic connection.

Plant/connectedness

1. Vine as the symbol of God in Judaism. God as gardener, Jesus as vine, us as branches.
2. Fruits=works of love (as in 1 John: “Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.”)
3. Branches that wither: not outsiders, but those in the community who do not love.
4. Fruit: signs of discipleship.
5. Question of who ‘belongs’—see Acts.

The Gospel passage is one that is familiar to us, and again, my tendency is go to the pruning section and start to panic. Don’t prune me, Lord! Don’t cast me into the flames! I’ll produce, honest! But as 1 John reminds us, fear of that sort has no place here. Again, my first reading of the passage on fear is also one of failure—great, I’m feeling afraid, that means that I’m once again failing to get this right. (you’re getting a wonderful glimpse into my psyche this morning!). But that is again misunderstanding the point, I think. Nathan Wilson writes in his commentary on 1 John that fear is self-conscious, while love is others-conscious. That is getting closer to the relationship, I think, between pruning and fear. First and foremost, in the metaphor of the vine, we derive our strength and vibrancy from the vine that is Jesus, not from our own willpower. Second, the fruit we are to bear is the work of love in the world, which is echoed in 1 John (“everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God”). The branches that wither are not failures to graft, but those already part of the community who are forgetting to love. But as Rick McPeak totally awesomely pointed out to me this week, such productivity does not happen all at once or all the time. One does not prune the ‘dead’ branches in the winter—because that would be stupid. The metaphor of the vine is a metaphor of process and growth, not of instantaneous performance. Growing things takes time. Perhaps the fear that 1 John condemns is a kind of self-pruning we can do—a closing-off of growth and works of love, not because we’re jerks but because we convince ourselves that we’re not doing enough, not performing enough, not producing enough. What if in fear we cut off our own intimacy with the Vine? What if Roosevelt was right, and fear itself is the culprit? Isn’t it ironic that the very sense of fear of failure with which I opened this sermon may be what gets in the way of the graft? As such, the real test is not a test of production, but of surrender; not a test as to who loves sufficiently, but a test of trust, trusting that love is perfected in us because God first loved us and loves us still. This is not a get-out-of-jail-free card I’m suggesting here. Some of us perhaps do need to hear that reminder that works of love are the signs of discipleship, that simply resting our laurels in our own salvation is a sign that perhaps that graft ain’t so strong. But for the rest

of us, the ones who worry and fret about our own salvation rather than taking it for granted, the ones who hear about pruning and fire and fear and feel judged...perhaps we need new ears to hear this. We need to hear of the gardener whose most fervent desire is that we feel utterly with him as he is with-us, Emmanuel, that we trust and let flow the other-conscious acts of love without turning so self-conscious that we get in our own way. As CH Dodd points out, love is not just one activity that God does, along with judging and resting and whatnot. Rather, all of God's activity is loving activity because God is love. Thus, even the pruning, the cleansing, is done in love, not in neutral judgment. Furthermore, God is calling us not just love Him back in some private relationship, but to love others as He loves us—an outpouring, a fruit-bearing, rather than a closed I-Thou in which love is merely circulated between me and God. This is reassuring because I can love others in my doubt; I can love others even in my trepidation about the security of my grafting! Even if I wrestle with who God is, I can love because God first loved, and this active love actually is a sign of my belonging, a sign of my attachment, membership, or connectedness.

Finally, I'd like to suggest that perhaps the Gospel passage may be read even wider, as we see in the Acts passage read earlier. Who is a branch of the vine? Who is part of the creation of God, a creation he nurtures and yes, prunes, for greater growth? Who is 'my fellow Christian'? The foreign eunuch is, for instance—a person who is doubly condemned in the traditional Judaism of the time for being both foreign (although this can be overcome) and sexually impure (which cannot be). Wanting to worship and yet kept out of the inner courts of the temple, reading scripture and reading himself into the suffering one sees in Isaiah 56, he is greeted by a stranger who tells him of a vine onto which he can be grafted, a work of love in the world in which he can belong, as he is.

It took me years to figure that out about the leap of faith in Kierkegaard, YEARS to realize that Johannes de Silentio was missing the point, that the leap of faith was not a performance I had to find the strength to make, but rather a trusting, a loving I would have my whole life in, rather than a one-time move that guarantees either my salvation or damnation. Scripture reveals the same thing: that the 'because He first loved me' truly does enable us to do His work in the world, in grace and in hope and without fear.