

April 7, 2019

John 15: 1-11

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

“The True Vine”

Our focus this morning is the words of Jesus when he says, “I am the true vine.” (John 15:1) There’s a story in the gospels where Jesus gathers the disciples around him and asks, “Who do you say that I am?” This is a question that goes to the core of our faith and, ultimately, each of us must answer for ourselves. Who is Jesus to us? In John’s Gospel, Jesus doesn’t ask this question outright. Instead, he shines light on who he is through a number of statements that begin with the words, “I am...” Jesus says, “I am the bread of life...I am the light of the world...I am the good shepherd...I am the way, the truth, and the life...” and in our reading for this morning in the 15th chapter of John, “I am the true vine.” Each of these statements reveals something important about Jesus and in the same breath he points to what is true about us. It’s the relationship between Jesus and us that is our focus for today. “I am the true vine.” These are words that describe who he is to us and who we are with him. But I want you to know the words of Jesus that have taken the deepest hold of me are words he speaks later in the 15th chapter of the gospel. After describing what the metaphor of the vine means, Jesus says, “apart from me you can do nothing.” Apart from Jesus we can do nothing. Apart from Jesus there is a void, an emptiness. This is one of those places in scripture where we find ourselves quickly reading along and it’s as if something grabs the breath right out of us. Apart from Jesus we can do nothing. Hard stop right there. We can do nothing. Is this true? It must be true. The words are spoken by the one who is The Truth. Apart from Jesus we can do nothing. He is revealing not only who is he but who we are, and without him we are left with emptiness and an aching void.

It’s obvious we have come to the preaching time of our morning worship and by the very nature of where we are I’m prepared to talk for awhile. When I was a kid this was the time in the service when I’d reach for the bulletin and a pencil, and start to draw or doodle on the page. My dad was the preacher and I knew I could hear him talk any time, so I kind of checked out. And it wasn’t unusual for my mom to dig into her purse and pull out a roll of Life Savers and offer me some candy to quiet my movements. I think I sensed, even as a child, that the preaching was important but it didn’t always hold my full attention. Now, well into a long career of preaching myself, I get it. I’ve got some things on my mind that I want to share with you but you’ve got things on your mind, too. So, if we are at that place where you may start to check out or if there are issues going on in your life that demand your reflection and focus this morning, it’s OK. Any preacher with even the slightest measure of self awareness knows this isn’t about him or her. Your attention may drift elsewhere right now. Like I’ve said, I get it. But, the message of Jesus has the capacity to reach through all that would either pull us away or distract us this morning. “Apart from me you can do nothing,” he says. There’s nothing casual about this statement. It takes hold of us because there is so much we want to do and so much we have to do, and the challenge is the realization that in the midst of the many things which we do we may not be aware of the Jesus connection to it all. Jesus is the true vine for us because he is the source that brings the flow of meaning and purpose into our lives. There may be other promises or powers we’re holding on to, hoping a firm grip will get us through. Maybe we’re holding to our own self-confidence, the kind that says, “I’ve got this. I don’t need God.” Maybe we’re relying on some image of what it means to be successful, chasing after some illusive vision that can never fulfill. “I am the true vine,” says Jesus, and the stark truth is that without him life can become shallow, dried up, and cut off. As we’ve said at other times in this significant spiritual season of Lent, now is the time to take an honest look at our lives. Are we holding on to Christ? Are we as connected as we want to be? Are we holding as firmly to him in the way he is holding on to us? Maybe the possibility is here and we’ll “check out” on these questions but there’s something very important at stake. What’s at stake is the depth and meaning of our lives. Without him we have nothing, we are nothing. What does it mean for you that Jesus is your true vine?

I’ve been working slowly through the past months on cleaning out my closets. I’m saying closets, in the plural, because throughout our house I’ve got a collection of clothes and other items that I don’t need. It’s taken me a long time to accomplish this “pruning.” One of our spare bedrooms has been the location for my stuff. This collection of excess has been laying all over the bed and across the floor. When I was finalizing my thoughts for this sermon my stuff was still all over that bedroom but as of this morning it’s all bagged and out of the house. I didn’t know that was going to happen. I thought sharing the story of my collected stuff would provide a good illustration of how we sometimes hold to things that don’t bring real life. What I didn’t account for was my wife, Kelly. In the last couple of days her input inspired me. Well, I don’t know, it may have been more ultimatum than inspiration. She said she’d had enough and after months of waiting it was time to get the job done. I needed that extra motivation and encouragement. What is it about us as human beings that we collect stuff we really don’t need? We get bogged down with things that just take up space, thinking holding on to it all will make our lives more secure or full. This

misguided approach reflects what can happen to us spiritually. Maybe we haven't cleaned house, spiritually speaking, in a long time. Maybe we've never taken stock of what we're carrying around in our spirit. Could it be we're clinging to old or no longer relevant ways of thinking about a life with God? Maybe we're not even aware that all the stuff we're holding on to is in fact cutting us off from what God most wants to accomplish in our lives. At issue of the central question for this morning, are we holding to Christ?

A few days ago I came across the writing of an author whose name is Philip Simmons. Philip writes in the wake of the devastating news of his diagnosis of ALS, commonly referred to as Lou Gehrig's disease. He wrote, "For me, knowing that my days are numbered has meant the chance to ask with new urgency the sorts of questions most of us avoid: everything from 'What's my life's true purpose?' to 'Should I re-organize my closets?' What I've learned from asking them is that a fuller consciousness of my own mortality has been my best guide to being more fully alive. . ." With the theme of our morning, Philip's terminal illness caused him to consider what he was holding on to. Philip goes on to write, "We deal most fruitfully with loss by accepting the fact that we will one day lose everything. When we learn to fall, we learn that only by letting go our grip on all that we ordinarily find most precious—our achievements, our plans, our loved ones, our very selves—can we find, ultimately, the most profound freedom. In the act of letting go of our lives, we return more fully to them." What honesty Philip Simmons applied to his life, and his words help us turn back to the reality that "apart from Christ we are nothing."

The good news for us is that we don't have to wait for an earth shattering diagnosis to renew our hold on Jesus. In our Lenten study the author of our book, Rob Fuquay, invites us to think of life this way. On one side is what we hope to produce, the fruit of our lives, the result of our passions, our relationships, our loves. On the other side is our hold of Jesus. Whatever happens through Christ flows through us and brings to life what matters. We are nothing without him but this is not the message we're left with this morning. There's another place in the bible that says, "With Christ we can do all things." This is the message we celebrate today. Afterall, Christ first loved us. Christ first called us. Christ first took hold of our lives. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. In him, we are much more than nothing. With Christ we are everything God has created us to be.