

Jesus is vine and vine dresser

The last three Sundays before Pentecost each year seat us at table with Jesus at the Last Supper. John's version of the Last Supper differs strikingly from the other three Gospels. Most alarming is that John's Jesus does not say his famous lines, "Take and eat; this is my body. Take and drink; this is my blood." John's description of the Eucharist comes from the "bread of life" discourse, which Jesus gives in chapter six. Moreover, John is the only evangelist who tells the story of the washing of the feet. On Holy Thursday, we turn to John's Gospel to hear this story that links service to the Supper, but we have to listen to Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (11:23-26) to hear what happens to the bread and wine. John himself never tells us.

What John does give us is Jesus' lengthy farewell discourse and final prayer to the Father. These chapters (13-17) include some of the Gospel's most cherished images, and constitute an absolutely huge description of the Last Supper (five whole chapters!), when compared with evangelists like Mark, who tells the whole event in merely 15 verses (14:12-26).

The chronology, then, is a little confusing. We've long left Holy Thursday behind with the dust and ashes of Lent. But the lectionary invites us to pull up a chair with Jesus once more as we await the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

This year the first of the three excerpts we'll hear explores the image of vine and branches (John 15:1-8). In this symbol of union, Jesus characterizes the intimate relationship he shares with his faithful followers.

From the Old Testament, we're familiar with stories of bad vines. Jeremiah uses the image to decry unfaithful Israel (2:21; 5:10; 8:13; 12:10). Isaiah laments a vineyard that won't produce (5:1-7). And Ezekiel knows the same problem (17:5-19; 19:10-14). From the New Testament, we expect that wayward plants will be gathered up and destroyed at the final judgment (Matthew 3:10 and 13:30). The return of this theme forms a lump in our throats.

But Jesus also emphasizes the positive aspect of this image. He rejoices in the union of vine and branches, and the life that the vine offers to those that cling. "Abide in me," he says, "as I abide in you." Although he warns that withered branches will be tossed away, this vine-dresser has more interest in cultivation than in strip mining.

Why this concern about withered branches? There are two reasons. First the unfaithful branches may be those whose faith weakens from the threat of persecution. At the time John wrote his Gospel (about 100 A.D.), that persecution took life-threatening forms against the early Church. Today's persecution is more subtle: society's greed taints our moral decision-making; the lure of sensuality causes us to compromise long-held beliefs; the evil influence of others tempts us to cheat the Gospel. The vine-dresser warns that these withered branches will be pruned away.

This leads us to the second reason for this concern. If the withered branches are not discarded, they will hurt and divide the entire vine. Jesus appeals to his followers for unity and love.

When Jesus calls himself the "true" vine, he reminds us of his self-description as the "good" or "model" shepherd. He is the best vine. He is the vine responsible for the branches. For us then, "keeping the commandments" simply means "loving Christ." And "abiding in Christ" means "being at prayer." In Christ we find our union, and he yearns to make it true.

Hearing this text in the Easter season gives it a baptismal context. On Easter day we celebrate the baptism of new members in our Church. Those who have been members longer renew our own baptismal promises. Now as we enter the season of Christ's resurrected life, we celebrate the season of our baptized Christian life. That life should be characterized by union with Christ.

A month after Easter, what's happened to our lenten resolutions? Are we faithful to our baptismal promises? Where will the vine-dresser prune us? Our parishes? Our society? Our Church?