

A Healthy Vine
a sermon preached for the Installation of Kathryn Z. Johnston as
Head of Staff at Mechanicsburg Presbyterian Church
Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania
April 19, 2009

Psalms 100:1-5

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the LORD with gladness; come into his presence with singing. Know that the LORD is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name. For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

John 15:1-17

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

First, I want to state the obvious. Thank you. Thank you for inviting me to be a part of this most wonderful and joyous day. Mechanicsburg Presbyterian Church is blessed to be installing such a fabulous pastor and head of staff, working with such a stupendous staff in Stephen, Myrtle, and Kathy, Suzanne, and Connie. Kathryn **is** a gifted minister, she is also an amazing colleague and friend.

I live and work in a town by the name of Chapel Hill. You may have heard that the University there has a pretty good basketball team, and might even have heard of our star player, Tyler Hansbrough.

A couple of months ago, Kathryn and I were talking on the phone about church. She was in her office, and I was on my cell phone walking down the street in downtown Chapel Hill. We'd already covered what was going on in my life, and now Kathryn was relaying her worries about a particularly serious pastoral care situation.

Rather, she was **trying** to relay the situation and ask for my advice when, very suddenly, my end of the conversation went silent. The line was still connected, but I was no longer listening or responding to what she was saying. There were several long moments of silence, broken by my saying what, to Kathryn, must have seemed odd... "Hey. Have a good game tonight."¹ Followed by several more long moments of silence and then... a squeal. A teenage-girl, Jonas-Brothers-squeal, and **finally**, I could tell her what had just happened. In walking, I had encountered none other than Tyler Hansbrough. If you don't know who that is, just insert Joe Paterno. Or Brad Pitt. There he was, Tyler Hansbrough, and we were walking down the sidewalk together. Well, he was walking. I was jogging and trying to look like I was walking. And then, as he turned to enter our local drug store and lunch counter, I, very coolly and nonchalantly, greeted him. "Hey. Have a good game tonight." I was breathless. Giddy.

What does this have to do with Kathryn, you ask? Kathryn is such a good friend and colleague that she knew when I got silent that something big must have been going on. She didn't interrogate me or even hang up on me. And then, when she found out what had happened, not only did she not chastise me for neglecting the serious issue which had been on the table before my moment of greatness, she was... Happy For Me.

She'll even be proud of me for telling, trying to tell, a sports story today which is something akin to taking coals to Newcastle. Or maybe water to a flood.

Kathryn is that kind of friend. It's the kind of friend Jesus talked and taught about so frequently, and particularly in the passage from John we just heard.

¹ Also, it wasn't any ordinary game day. That night, December 18, Tyler Hansbrough would break Phil Ford's record and become the all-time leading scorer in UNC Basketball history.
http://www.newsobserver.com/sports/college/unc/mens_basketball/story/1339485.html

In these verses from John, part of Jesus' farewell address to his disciples, Jesus is trying to get some last words of wisdom into the heads and hearts of those who were going to be responsible for spreading the good news.

And one of the big points he has for them is friendship. If they are going to make it work, they are going to need to be friends for one another.

Not acquaintances. Not people who tolerate one another on Sundays. Real friends. The kind that are honest and caring and supportive and want what is best for the other person regardless of how it affects them personally. It's been described as "*benevolentia*, a love that will's another's good."²

When I say that you are blessed and gifted with Kathryn's leadership, it's because she gets this kind of love, this kind of wanting the best for another. And this is what she will share with you. Not what she wants or wills, but working with you to discern where God is calling you, what God wants for you. Walking with you in joy, sorrow, challenge, and in hope.

It's what God calls us to be with one another. In relationship. In faithful relationship.

A kind of relationship born of the principles that Jesus sets forth in the first part of chapter 15, the way of the vine.

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. . . . I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit..."

How do we live out the life which Jesus has called us to live? Jesus tells us we must recognize that we are in this together. One branch does not make a healthy vineyard. Branches in a healthy vine system, or viticulture, are a twisting, weaving affair, going back and forth, leaning on one another for support as they expand and grow.

This past Sunday, on a "This I Believe" segment, National Public Radio told the story of Eve Birch, a librarian who lives in Martinsburg, West Virginia³. She said:

I used to believe in the American dream that meant a job, a mortgage, cable, credit, warranties, success. I wanted it and worked toward it like everyone else....[until]... through a series of unhappy events, it all fell apart. I found myself homeless and alone. I had my truck and \$56.

I scoured the countryside for someplace I could rent for the cheapest possible amount. I came upon a shack in an isolated hollow.... abandoned, full of broken

² Gerald Sloyan, "*Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*," Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988, 190.

³ http://www.thisibelieve.org/dsp_ShowEssay.php?uid=41798&topessays=25&&start=

glass and rubbish. ... I found the owner and rented the place for \$50 a month. I took a bedroll, a broom, rope, a gun and cooking gear, and cleared a corner to camp in while I worked.... The locals knew nothing about me. But slowly, they started teaching me the art of being a neighbor. They dropped off blankets, candles, tools and canned deer meat....

Men would stop by with wild berries, ice cream, truck parts.... The women...taught me the value of a whetstone to sharpen my knives, how to store food in the creek and keep it cold and safe. I learned to keep enough for an extra plate for company.

What I had believed in, all those things I thought were the necessary accouterments for a civilized life, were nonexistent in this place. Up on the mountain, my most valuable possessions were my relationships with my neighbors.

The American dream I believe in now is a shared one. It's not so much about what I can get for myself; it's about how we can all get by together.

In the life of the vine, the life of faith, community isn't a luxury or an accessory, in the life of faith, it is a necessity.

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. . . . I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit..."

Community is not, of course, the only necessity. Jesus tells us that we need one another, and He tells us that we need God. Back to viticulture, we know that without pruning, without tending, branches, will, over time, cease to flourish. Without a healthy vine, tended and cared for, the branches cannot thrive or bear fruit.

We need God. We can't do this without God. In his classic text, "Does God have a Big Toe," Rabbi Marc Gellman tells the story of creation, which ends with the establishment of a partnership between us and God. When asked what a partnership is, God gives this answer "A partner is someone you work with on a big thing that neither of you can do alone. If you have a partner, it means that you can never give up, because your partner is depending on you. On the days you think your partner is not doing enough and on the days your partner thinks you aren't doing enough, even on those days you are still partners....That's the deal."⁴

We can't do this on our own. We need each other. We need God. God's wisdom, vision, instruction, and forgiveness.

⁴ Gellman, Marc. Does God Have a Big Toe?: Stories About Stories in the Bible. New York: Harper Collins, 1989..

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. . . . I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit..."

Finally, Jesus reminds us that the point of all of this is not the branches, and is not even the vine, it is the fruit which is truly our goal. The fruit which we bear in our living and relating to one another. In our speech and our action. In the God-given peace, hope, and justice which will be, because of our relationships with one another and with God, are our calling card to everyone we meet and to each place that we go.

There is a video on You Tube right now that can only be described as a colossal hit.⁵ In the last three weeks, it has been viewed more than 3 million times. It is a video of something that happened in the train station in Antwerp. When the scene opens, it is a normal, rush hour scene of a train station main hall, people walking to and fro, some are visiting with friends, and others are determined to get where they are going.

Then the music starts. Julie Andrews' voice. "Do-Re-Mi" from the Sound of Music. And then come the dancers. They don't look like dancers. They are dressed like business people, travelers and tourists, teenagers and children with backpacks, but dance they do, more and more joining in as time goes by, until there are some 200 dancers united in choreographed movements to the song, a song so well known that it is hard not to sing along.

It is clearly a staged event. But what has been striking to so many of us as we have watched it isn't the event itself, it is people's reactions to it. The people in the train station who weren't a part of the planning. Some of them join in the dancing. Others sing along. Some clap. Smiles are everywhere. And when it is over, there is a general lingering where, just a few minutes before, there had been people all over, buzzing around like bees, focused on their tasks and destinations.

In some ways, it reminds me of that song. "They will know that we are Christians by our love."⁶

In some ways it reminds me, but what happened in that train station was more than people KNOWING something, they were changed by what happened. They didn't walk away from that train station's great hall the same as when they arrived, and from the looks on their faces and their body language, they are clearly the better for what they had experienced.

Maybe, this is what Jesus had in mind when he talked about a healthy vine. What it would look like and what it would do out in the world. People won't only know that we are Christians by the ways that we walk and talk, but they will be changed by it, too.

⁵ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7EYAUazLlgk>

⁶ "And They Will Know We Are Christians," written by Peter Scholtes. Additional words and music by Carolyn Arends. <http://www.carolynarends.com/music/lyrics/tkwac.html>

I started this sermon by saying how lucky Mechanicsburg Presbyterian Church is to have called Kathryn to be you head of staff. And you are. That makes this a good day. What makes it a fabulous day is what Kathryn would be the first to add that she is lucky to have been called here, too. To walk with you and love you and to befriend you in a profoundly Christ-like way.

And I cannot help but think, that the relationships you develop in the years ahead, as this vine here grows in health and faith, will change not only you, but all those that you meet.

Thanks be to God. Thanks be to God. Amen