

John 15:1-8
May 2, 2021

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Grace and peace be with you from God our Father and our risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

So, does anyone else like getting a haircut? I love it. I love getting the old frizz cut off. I always feel so much better. So much lighter.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus talks about how the ends of branches on the vine sometimes need to be trimmed down so that the branch can bear fruit. Basically, the dead stuff at the ends and the suckers need to be cut off so that energy can go where it needs to go – in producing fruit. The frizz has got to be chopped off from time to time.

If the ends of the branches are just sucking energy and they're not producing fruit, there is no need to keep them. If they are already dead and dried up, cut them off and burn them in the fire. At least then they'll be doing some good by producing a fire and some heat.

Maybe we could even roast some marshmallows over them and make some 'smares! Wouldn't that make for a great rite for confession and absolution? God takes all of our worthless stuff, our sin, and burns it up, and in the process uses it to make something good – like 'smares! Something to think about.

On Thursday, Shane Claiborne posted on FaceBook about an article written in the Christian Century, a religious journal. The article talked about how Eastern University, his alma mater, was a laboratory for the evangelical left.

If you don't know Shane Claiborne, he might be what some call a hippy. He lives in a commune and shares a lawnmower with the people in his neighborhood. Whenever he goes on a speaking engagement, the trip has to be carbon neutral, trees have to be planted to offset his air travel and hotel stay.

In his comments about the article, he said, "I find the labels "left" and "right" to be pretty unhelpful categories. I don't consider myself Left or Right, but firmly grounded in Jesus. Some things are not about Left or Right, but about right and wrong."

When I read that, I immediately thought about the vine and the branches in today's Gospel. Picture it - the main vine with branches coming off of it. Some are going left and others are going right. The further out either side gets, the more they spilt and go off on tangents. The further they grow out, the further they get from each other, and the vine who is at the center.

It's no wonder there is so much hostility between the extreme right and the extreme left. They have gotten so far away from each other, and from Jesus in the middle, that they have lost their whole mission, and instead of fruit being produced there is only hate and deadlock – no fruit at all, just dead branches.

It seems to me that one side goes off in fear and the other side goes off in anger, and I guess anger can be the flip side of fear. But, love... Love pulls us all back to the center. God's love calls us all home, back to the vine.

God comes to us in Christ Jesus so that we all can know what true love is, and in knowing God's love, we are enabled to share that love with others. The closer we are to the vine, the easier that is to do.

If you watched the Academy Awards last Sunday, you might have seen Tyler Perry get the Jean Hersholt Humanitarian Award. If you've not seen it, I commend it to you today to reflect on in light of today's gospel.

In his speech, Perry invited all people to join him in the middle, because that is where healing happens. Perry showed neither anger nor fear, only love and in that love he offered an invitation for all people to come together and love one another.

There is no problem going slightly left or right as long as we stick as close as possible to Jesus. The problem often is we try to haul off with Jesus to whatever side we are on, but the thing about the vine is that it is firmly planted in God and cannot be moved.

So, we always need to evaluate ourselves and see how far away we are from Jesus, and it's really not that hard to tell. All we need to do is ask ourselves two simple questions - Am I afraid? Am I angry? It's only with that assessment that we can then seek our Peace in Christ.

Thanks be to God, we are a death and resurrection people. We are a reforming people. We are a forgiveness and eternal life people.

Any time we go too far out on a limb, we need only check ourselves. Where is Jesus? How far away are we from God's message of love and compassion? Are we hating the branch on the opposite side? Are we afraid of them?

Is Jesus hateful of anyone? Is Jesus afraid of anyone? No. Of course not.

Jesus is God's compassion personified. Our extremity, or extreme-ity, got Jesus nailed to the cross, but on the third day he took up his life again in order to bring us back to him – to bring us back to the vine – back to the middle - to forgive us all of our sin and make us whole so that we can be his compassion in the world for the sake of the world. That is the fruit the vine produces.

Now consider the vine Jesus is talking about. It is a grape vine.

Where do we have wine at church? Fermented grape juice. Grape juice that has died and been resurrected to new life. Holy Communion, right?

And what is said as the wine is blessed – “This is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the... forgiveness of sin.” Forgiveness of sins.

When we drink the wine at Holy Communion, it becomes a part of us. We become the fruit of forgiveness. We become Jesus' presence for the sake of the world.

So, when we encounter someone who is at the opposite extreme from us, and we feel fear or anger, we need only reclaim our spot next to Jesus, crucified and resurrected, and be re-centered in God's love. No matter our differences, with Christ, we can offer anyone and everyone God's love and compassion and bring healing.

And, anytime we ourselves are carrying the heavy burden of judgement, of anger and fear from others, we can also take our place at Jesus' side and feel him cut all of those dead branches off from us.

A friend of mine had been in a pretty dark place. All of the ugliness he was feeling on the inside was being expressed in his blue hair on the outside. He was in an abusive relationship where he was told he was worthless and wrong about who he knew himself to be. He was in great pain.

One day he came to himself. He had an epiphany. He realized that what he was being told was a lie. He was not what others claimed him to be. From there he went straight to Super Cuts and had all of that blue hair shaved off. He was set free.

With words of abuse, he had slowly grown into a dead limb, way far away from Jesus and God's message of love, but the Holy Spirit stepped in through friends and family, and he was brought back to himself, the person God created him to be, and he was brought back to the vine of which he was always a part.

Those who loved him carried him home, and all of those dead bits that had been stuck to him were cut off and he was alive again.

God is love, and the further we go from love, the harder it is to love others or ourselves. And so, at worship, we come back to the love to re-center ourselves around Jesus so that we can produce good fruit in the world.

Good fruit is only produced close to the vine, because that is where God's love enters our life, through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.

So every morning we should splash water on our faces and trace the cross of Christ made on our foreheads in baptism and re-center ourselves next to Christ, next to our vine who gives us life.

Today is the fifth Sunday of Easter. Today we continue to celebrate the resurrection, and we also come to realize that it is not only Jesus who is resurrected, but it is we ourselves who are resurrected with him.

In baptism, we are joined as one with Jesus in his death and resurrection. His death and resurrection are our death and resurrection.

Through his death and resurrection, Jesus is constantly bringing us new life by cutting off and destroying everything that would distance us from God's love.

Whenever we are far off on a limb, God always calls us back home to the vine.

Jesus says – "I am the vine and you are the branches. Stick close to me. We're going out into the world to share God's love in the world. Together we will produce the good fruit of unconditional love!"

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! And so are we! Alleluia!

Thanks be to God.