

Homily
April 28, 2024
5th Sunday of Easter
25:30-34:23

“And you will bear much fruit and **become** my disciples.” It seems odd that Jesus is speaking to the disciples that are already his and uses a future tense, “will become my disciples,” even though they are right there in front of him.

This is one of the characteristics of John’s Gospel writing. There’s always a moment somewhere, almost hidden, that Jesus, though he’s addressing the present moment in his life, is addressing us – all those who come after the original disciples. Thus, we know we are branches on the vine of Christ. And we are becoming always, disciples.

He also said today, “Live on in me as I in you.” And “I am the vine; you are the branches.”

Now, I am not a professional gardener or forester. And since Matthew’s upstairs and he is a professional forester--well, someone of you here is going to have to tell me if what I am about to say is inaccurate. After Mass let me know. (Pause.) You get to tell the pastor he’s wrong.

If you take a limb on a tree and strip off all of its leaves and every time it starts to attempt to put out more leaves you strip those off, it will die. It will wither and eventually fall to the ground.

Strip off the foliage and the bark of the entire tree, leaving the trunk standing there ghastly white or gray and bare, the tree will die. Its source of food production and protection are gone.

Finally, just leave the tree standing. Then cut it down. And leaves, branches, bark – everything – will surely die. We can do the same thing with any foliage-bearing plant. If we keep doing the stripping enough times, it will die.

But let’s make a perspective change here. Let’s focus more on life rather than death.

If we take time to tend to the leaves, the bark, the limbs, to the care of the branches and the trunk, the tree will live. In fact, it will bear much fruit. Even if it is a smelly old mulberry bush, or an obnoxious ginko tree. (Does anyone know what a ginko tree is? If the female bears fruit, the smell is unbelievable. It's worse than dog poo. I know. I had a male and a female tree in the front yard of St. Mary's in Richmond.)

It doesn't matter. If a plant bears much fruit because we have cared for the life of all the parts, from the smallest to the largest --the tree, the bush, the plant -- will live.

There is a wonder in this interdependence of all the parts of a tree. The interdependence keeps it alive, as life flows from one part to the other and back again.

Jesus, as he describes in the Gospel today, is the life-giving source – the vine, bound and rooted to the Father, who is the ultimate source of all life. Jesus proclaims himself as this. And he said to his disciples and therefore to all of us here, “You are the branches on the vine.”

The vine and the branches are interdependent. Just like the tree and the limbs, they need one another.

Now we might think or act as if we don't need the Lord, but all of the fibers of our faith reverberate this truth: ***we need the Lord to live life to its fullest.***

Similarly, we might think of ourselves as unnecessary to the Lord – at best a nuisance to God. But my brothers and sisters, Jesus needs us. It's true. Just as without the vine – Jesus – the branches die, so also without the branches, the leaves, the bark, the life in the vine will not be distributed, intermingled or shared.

The vine cannot sustain the life of the plant without the branches. This is also true of how the Lord remains alive in the world. Without the branches, that is the Church, the people of God, the Body of Christ, the kingdom and reign of God cannot give life.

And so there are for us three possible connections to this metaphor that Jesus uses. There is the connection to the individual. If we look upon ourselves as a cell, a leaf, the bark or a tiny shoot upon the vine of Christ, we are carriers of the life sap, the energy, the shade for and the sustainer of the vine, the fruit.

Or there is our connection to the local Faith Community, in this case Our Lady of Lourdes, a parish, as a branch on the vine. The parish is the bearer of much life, much fruit, even different hybrid fruits on the same branch.

And there is a third connection for us, much larger than ourselves here at Our Lady of Lourdes, the Church with its many branches, indeed as a vineyard. This is the whole plant, large and meaty and full of life, sustaining many large and smaller branches, leaves, bark and cells, with their varied roles to the life of the whole **for the life of the world.**

The singularity of the individual needs sap, the lifeblood of the Lord. A parish community, the local Faith community, needs the life sap of the Lord. And the Church must share that life source within itself and for the world. To fulfill our need and sustain its source, we are connected. As one, we pass back-and-forth that life, which is in the Lord.

“Live on in me as I do in you. I am the vine; you are the branches.” Thus speaks the Lord. For our consideration then, are we connected? How are we the source of life shared? How shall we be the source of life shared to the world?