

“Future generations will be told about the Lord,
and proclaim deliverance to
a people yet unborn.” AMEN!

Here we are at week five of
the season of Easter and we hear
the end of the psalm that
Jesus cried out while on the cross.

You see, Psalm 22 begins with “My God, my God,
why have you forsaken me?”

It was practiced by rabbi’s that when
one spoke the first line or lines
from the Psalms

it meant the hearer was to take
the whole psalm into account.

It’s almost like God is whispering to us
in the midst of the celebration of resurrection

to remember that it began with a cross
and with a crucifixion.

Even though the psalm begins in quite a dark place,
it ends with promises of good things and hope.

We go forward and we look back. (Pause)

And, we have texts, like John's gospel today that reminds us of Jesus' final words to his disciples before his arrest.

That's what this section is, a section of his final words to them.

We go backward to understand meaning as we move forward in the Easter season.

And like last week, we find Jesus using metaphor to help his followers understand what was happening.

We talked about metaphor and the way that word comes from two Greek words meaning "carry across."

How does Jesus' teaching about vines, branches and fruit "carry" us "across" the gaps in our understandings? (Pause)

You've likely heard this part of his conversation used to exhort (or encourage) people to be "good" branches and avoid being "bad" branches, right?

The good ones get pruned and therefore
produce more fruit but the bad ones, oh,
the bad ones are gathered and thrown
into the fire.

It might make for a stirring sermon to motivate
a congregation, but that was not what Jesus
was doing here.

He was not threatening his followers
during his final conversation with them
in order to inspire courage or loyalty,
at all costs.

Why do preachers feel as though they
must threaten the listeners from the pulpit?

Well, I guess I know why.

Its done because it's easy;
it's a cop out really, and it keeps them
from the challenge of deeper thinking.

You see it, right?

A bully pulpit is the way to retain power and
wield that power in the name of the Lord.

Scare 'em into Jesus' arms.

But, it's really just an easy, or shall we say,
a shallow way to preach.

The easy way to gather followers
by playing on people's fears, and then
giving comfort to them

by making the other person/people the scapegoat.

It's all their fault!

"They are the ones who get gathered and
thrown into the fire," they preach.

Heck, some lazy preachers are even calling on
their people to be the ones who gather
these "other" branches.

Stoking anger and fear to the point
that they're encouraging them to take up
the action lighting the match.

You know, if that was to be what
we should be doing then Jesus would
have said so.

He would have let Peter, Judas Iscariot,
and the others take up arms to protect him

with sword and shield,
but he didn't.

He chose to be courageously non-violent.

He spoke of his purpose and calling.

He exemplified love in action and truth
while knowing where he was going, and

he walked the path prepared for what it
would do to those around him.

He knew the loss they'd experience.

So he spoke of connection by using a metaphor
about vines, branches, and fruit.

Jesus didn't say, "Make everyone a Christian."

He didn't encourage them to fight or
write words that threaten and divided people
into boxes or categories of being "in" or "out."

(Pause)

It has occurred to me, the last year or so,
that some branches of Christianity have moved
in directions that no longer follow Jesus.

Perhaps, I am naive to have only begun
to recognize this in the last year, but parts of
the church universal have forsaken
the teachings of Jesus.

They think love and self-sacrifice are
signs of weakness and they preach
that awareness... awareness is evil.

And those places are full of people!

If we were to measure success by how many
people come to church and measure
discipleship based on how much
money is collected,
we'd have to conclude that they
were perfectly successful!

But, we don't measure success that way.

Or at least we aren't supposed to, if
following Jesus's example is what
we are supposed to do. (Pause)

So, it got me thinking, what kind of church
would Jesus want us to be?

Or, if you have a problem with that question,
what does a church that follows what Jesus

taught or exemplified look like?

Is it one that shouts scripture verses
from the street corner?

What about one that sits back and waits
for people to come to the door?

Is it the kind of church that taps people on
the shoulder and asks
“Have you accepted Jesus Christ as
your personal Lord and Savior?

Is it the kind of church that never speaks
about what brings joy and sorrow
to people’s lives?

Is it one that works to fight for a place at
the decision making table or one that
welcomes everyone to the decision
making table?

I mean, it is important to know,
what are we supposed to do in order
to remain connected to Jesus? (Pause)

Most of us have had those conversations
with people who wear their badge of
religious supremacy.

Sometimes they'll see me wearing a pastor's collar
and think I'm one of them.

When I tell them that's not me,
then I become their enemy.

Religious supremacy asks,
"Who wrote the Book of Isaiah?"

If you say any other name than "Isaiah,"
even though virtually every notable
Biblical scholar agrees that the text was
most likely written by three different
authors, then you're a heretic
and weak in faith.

We've had those or similar conversations where
the person is trying to find out what
kind of Christian we are.

But, they really aren't conversations, are they?

They are tests to see if you're
one of the "good" ones or a "bad" one. (Pause)

So what is it that makes us a church
that follows Jesus?

Here's a hint... it has nothing to do with numbers in the seats.

It has nothing to do with how much money we have in the bank.

It has nothing to do with whether we say one person or three people wrote Isaiah.

It has nothing to do with being seated next to political decision makers.

Here's another hint... the answers are in our lessons for today. :-)

In Acts, we have the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch who was wealthy, they had status.

Returning from worshipping God in the temple they had a scroll of the Isaiah text, but there was something missing.

A teacher was missing.

One who could explain meaning behind the text, and not just any teacher, but one who could have a conversation about it.

Not a teacher who used their position
to boost their own power or status
as “knowing it all.”

But a teacher who took time to develop
a relationship so that when a Spirit
moment occurs,
like it did to the Ethiopian Eunuch, and

they proclaim, “Look, here’s water!
What is to prevent me from being baptized?”

The teacher who’s open to become
the student and reply,

“Nothing, should keep you from being baptized.”

So, lesson number one: to be a church
that follows Jesus means all people
have a place and something/s to offer. (Pause)

The second has to do with Jesus’ words of
metaphor in the gospel.

He is not talking threats but about being part of
a larger organization of faith.

Mutual dependence is necessary and it can

come to those who are not connected to Jesus,
but he's the one who said the words.

So, for us to be a church that follows Jesus means
that we want to stay connected to Jesus.

He's the vine and we are the branches.

If we go too far from Jesus, we suffer.

Dwell in Christ and we'll bear fruit. (Pause)

Finally, since three is a good number, we turn
to what is written in 1 John today.

If we want to know whether we are following
Jesus' teachings and examples then we must
look to see if we are loving.

It's not only about loving God.

For those who say, "I love God" but hate
their brothers and sisters and siblings are liars.

Hating a person means hating God.

So, if churches are encouraging revenge or
harm upon other people then
they've ceased to follow Jesus

and must be called back. (Pause)

No, not one of us is perfect, but let us strive
for the greater things.

The deeper understandings that we first belong
to God and every single one of us
(including those who aren't here yet)
have a place here, something to offer,
and fruit to share.

AMEN!