

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today is the Fifth Sunday of Easter, and today's gospel story comes from John, with Jesus moving away from the imagery of shepherd and sheep, and into the vineyard.

It lays out the distinction between going all out or just mailing it in. Making a total commitment, with full passion and full effort. As opposed to putting in the appearance only, and settling for just good enough.

I am a New York Mets baseball fan in the summer, Buffalo Sabres hockey fan in the winter. And even though I do not get to watch them on TV as often anymore, I sometimes get agitated and frustrated when I do. Why? Not because they lose....hey, everybody loses from time to time...no, it is because they just do not look like their hearts are in it. Professionals dropping easy fly balls in the outfield!

You know what I mean. It must be an unwritten law of human nature that we can observe and listen and watch someone else do or say anything, and somehow we can tell if they are in for a penny or for a pound, to use an old phrase. It does not matter what you do, if you love doing it...it shows. And if you do not love it...that shows, too.

Cannot fake it. Cannot force it. Cannot will it to happen. Cannot.

You and I may not fully understand the wine vineyard imagery used by Jesus. The great Finger Lakes wine region is just over an hour away. If this parish was in Interlaken or Hammondport, NY, it might be a different story. We probably have more folks here with actual experience growing tomatoes instead of wine grapes. And, if we have done that gardening...or will do that this summer...we know that it is advisable to cut away, or prune away, the little sucker shoots that form right at the place where the leaf branch off of the main stem. The idea, of course, is to put the plant's energy...all the water and nutrients that we lovingly add daily...into producing tomatoes, and not waste it into non-productive foliage.

Non-productive foliage.

What is the point of the message this morning?

In this gospel of John reading, even Jesus admitted that he had been a work in progress. God the Father removed the non-productive foliage of his life, and pruned the rest to make it more and more fruitful.

What is the meaning of being “more fruitful”? As church, we might be excused in this day and culture of placing value on measurable results, of focusing on the “bottom line” as the world would have us, being “more fruitful” could be interpreted to mean developing a strategy and implementing a plan to become a (quote) mega-church (unquote). Because bigger is better, or so we constantly hear. Having fuller pews. Fuller collection plates. Being “faithful” to the model of success, polish, and bling, while being “faithful” to God as a community probably should come in there somewhere.

No, instead what we know of Jesus from the gospels is that it is NOT, NOT, NEVER EVER about him, but rather is ALWAYS, ALWAYS about God his Father. This may be confusing, particularly as today’s gospel message is self-directed, saying that “I am the vine”, and “apart from me you can do nothing.” That echoes the declaration earlier in John’s gospel that “I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

What is up with that? In the 21st century, is Jesus saying “It is my way or the highway, otherwise you get pruned and thrown into the fire?” Can we agree that interpretation is one major reason why there are millions who stay away because they hear or think that they hear, “You are not worthy because my Bible says that you are toast”? You must, MUST, be just like me, or forget about it?

The historic and now contemporary greater church has distorted all this, and committed a huge transgression in the presence and in the name of God. Think about it. Who is Jesus? Who is this Jesus that you know or, if you do not know him, at least have heard about?

Forget the haters who masquerade as authoritative Christians. Read, and I mean REALLY read, the Gospels. Who is this Jesus? Is he the man who puts in the full effort, with passion, with total conviction...by healing EVERYONE, regardless of being Jew, Samaritan, Gentile? Does he ask to see ID, or a membership card, before feeding any of the 5,000? Does he just mail it in, making a good impression, by only hanging out, or eating with, or ministering to the wealthy, the privileged, the ones who pay for an audience? I read about “lowly” women as disciples...can you imagine? And even

worse, tax collectors...lower than low.

He is really saying, "I love EVERYBODY because I see God in all, in everyone I meet."

So, as a result, he says "I am *the* one", essentially saying, "Follow me. This is what it takes. It is at me, to me, that you must look for the way." It is **not** "Look at me because I am identical with the Father", but rather "Look at me, for I am the one by looking at whom you will see the Father since I make him known."

He is the **entire** vine and, if we allow ourselves to follow, leads to our spiritual evolution. The spiritual journey equivalent from just mailing it in, toward going all out. The spiritual difference between going through the motions throughout life, or giving one's heart fully to a complete ministry toward the kingdom of God, here and now. The heartfelt spiritual change between a real discipleship of living and loving God day by day, or checking the watch to see how soon we can get out of here and move onto something we really want to do on Sunday.

On the calendar, we are on the very edge of the coming of the Holy Spirit to metaphorically kick us into gear toward moving into the very image of God, if we let it happen. Today reveals our complete and total inter-relationship with God. Discipleship is the divine connection with the God. A divine connection that enhances the living, as disciples are people who commit themselves to living within the leadership of Christ in every aspect of life's journey, even with its potholes and wrong turns.

"Come unto me" ..is the first step. But, in the overwhelming love that we will not begin to understand until we are called home with him, we are called to more. We are called to the abiding stage.

Life here is short...and it is time for discipleship, not just membership. It is time for "being connected", for being "grafted" into the very life, the living self-revelation of God in this time and this place. The time for our hearts to be "all in". It is time for each of us to quietly pray and consider that the "kingdom of God" is here, and that Jesus commands us to abide in it through him...to joyfully and abundantly live the lives that God blesses each of us with in the eternal presence of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.