

Come, Spirit of Christ – show us Your way, teach us Your truth, fill us with Your life. Amen.

"Beloved, love one another...." Oh, if it were only so easy.

If we all loved one another, there would likely be genocide in Gaza, no war in Ukraine, no epidemic of gun violence, no terrorism, no greed, no racism.

If only we loved one another!

And maybe there would have been no Jesus, no need for God to be manifest in human form, in human life, in human communication.

So much of Jesus' message comes down to "Love one another" and

"Here's what real love looks like...."

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, St. Paul, St. John, St. Luke – they would have had other things to do, for their message would not be necessary.

Would there be any dramas, plays, movies, if we all loved one another?

Can you imagine such a world? Where we would all love one another?

That's not quite the world we live in. Jesus did come, God in a human body, to show us that love is stronger than death.

The supreme way he demonstrated love was to submit himself to an unjust and shameful death – and then show us life beyond death.

He spent a lot of time equipping his followers to confront death with love, and to fortify themselves by remaining attached to him, and to each other.

In the passage we heard today, he uses the image of the grapevine.

"If you want to bear the fruit of love, he says, you need to stay connected to me."

A vine is a great image to convey connectedness, strength, hardiness.

I know a little about vines. Up in Michigan, by our summer cottage, someone at some point introduced some grape vines. They even have grapes on them.

They look very picturesque draped over the fence.

But vines have a tendency to grow. They grow up telephone poles.

They grow up trees, and start to choke the life out of them.

At some point, we noticed that all the trees across the street from our house were being choked by vines, and I decided to cut them back.

What I discovered is that the damn things are endlessly long.

I'd grab a hunk of vine to get it off a tree or a bush,

and I'd pull and pull and pull off something about thirty feet long.

And each of those had other vines shooting off of them.
So I stopped trying to pull them off, and instead started tracing them back
to their woody roots, to the original point from which all the shoots came.
And I would cut that off, cut it in two or three places to cut off life to the vines.
I would never be able to get to the true root, just some sub-shoots.

What I was doing with my evil clippers was cutting off the life to the vine.
Because vines are hardy.
From one little rootstock, they can go long and high, and bear wonderful fruit.
The most precious commodity in a vineyard is the rootstock.
So vines were a useful example for Jesus to use for his church, the community
of his followers – if they stayed connected to him, to the rootstock,
this vine could grow far and wide, bringing wonderful fruit.
And if they didn't stay connected to him – if sin or evil cut them off from the
rootstock, they wouldn't last very long at all, and their fruitfulness would shrivel up.
Jesus' vision for his community was one of connection, to him,
and all along the vine, for maximum fruitfulness. Connected in love.

If we don't know ourselves to be connected to Jesus, and to one another,
we will not be very fruitful or endure.
I long to see every person connected to Christ Church be actively growing in faith,
engaged, equipped and empowered.
I want every newcomer to know this is a place where they can grow in love.
Our new website has a whole page dedicated to Learning and Growing in faith.
I post a daily spiritual reflection there each weekday,
and in Lent we will add reflections written by our own members.
I hope we will have weekly gatherings in Lent and Eastertide, as we did last year.
And we will figure out how to nurture faith in our children in a time when
families are so over-stressed and over-scheduled we have to find new models
of Sunday School. Maybe it happens with all of us during church.

Growth happens as we stay connected to God – and to each other.
Paul used a different image of connectedness – one we can all relate to: the body.
We all get immediately the silliness of thinking our feet would get very far without
our eyes or ears to guide us, or that our face matters more than our liver.
But Paul was writing to a community that thought some people with
some gifts were more valuable, more important than others.
He was writing to a church that was full of division, disconnected.

Happily, that is not us. But we live in a country that is full of division, disconnected. And we have a mission to carry God's healing love right into that wound. As our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry says, Love is THE way. Not just a nice feeling, but an active, powerful, transforming force. Connected in love.

I discovered just how connected in love this community is on January 6, when this congregation and Wayside came together to help with my mother's funeral. From the endless list of thank you notes I am trying to write – yes, they'll get done eventually – I saw a community coming together, each member using her and his particular gifts to make a beautiful thing, the flower people doing flowers, the cooks cooking, the organizers organizing. Different members, united in one mission. Connected in love.

That's how the growth impulse on the vine gets activated: when we love. It starts with loving Jesus, allowing his love to take root in us; and it grows with the decision, the choice, to love each other, and beyond. The word Jesus uses is "abide." We don't use that word much nowadays. But it's a good word. It speaks of sticking with, sticking to, hanging out with, hanging in with, hanging onto, not wandering off, being always attached to.

When we go into the parish hall for our lunch today, we will abide together. I hope so many of us choose to do that, we'll have to set up more tables!

This world is often a place of "not-love." But we have love. We have the rootstock from which life-blood of the vine flows. We have the heart of God pumping love into this body of Christ. We have this love that is stronger than death flowing through us to love the world God made.

"What the world needs now, is love, sweet love." Bring it, beloved!

Amen.

John 15:1-8

Jesus said, "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."**

1Corinthians 12:12-27

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot were to say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear were to say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you', nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.