

REFLECTION OF THE WEEK

Easter 5B, 2021

John 15. 1-8

"I am the true vine, you are the branches"

What if congregations lived as the branches of Christ the vine?

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Gail R. O'Day

"Reflections", New Interpreter's Bible

John 15:1-17 poses challenging questions to the contemporary Christian community about its self-identity. What does it mean for the church to live as the branches of Christ the vine? What would "church" look like if it embraced this model for its corporate life?

First, the image of community that emerges from John 15:1-17 is one of interrelationship, mutuality, and indwelling. To get the full sense of this interrelationship, it is helpful to visualize what the branches of a vine actually look like. In a vine, branches are almost completely indistinguishable from one another; it is impossible to determine where one branch stops and another branch starts. All run together as they grow out of the central vine. What this vine image suggests about community, then, is that there are no free-standing individuals in the community, but branches who encircle one another completely. The fruitfulness of each individual branch depends on its relationship to the vine, nothing else. What matters for John is that each individual is rooted in Jesus and hence gives up individual status to become one of many encircling branches.



The communal life envisioned in the vine metaphor raises a strong challenge to contemporary Western models of individual autonomy and privatism. At the heart of the Johannine model is social interrelationship and corporate accountability. The vine and

branches metaphor exhorts the community to steadfastness in its relationship to Jesus, a steadfastness that is measured by the community's fruits (vv. 4-5)....

**To live as the branches of the vine
is to belong to an organized unity
shaped by the love of Jesus.**

revealing itself to be one of Jesus' disciples (vv. 8-16). To live according to this model, then, the church would be a community in which members are known for the acts of love that they do in common with all other members. It would not be a community built around individual accomplishments, choices, or rights, but around the corporate accountability to the abiding presence of Jesus and corporate enactment of the love of God and Jesus.

Second, the metaphor of the vine suggests a radically non-hierarchical model for the church.... Fruitfulness is the only differentiation among branches, and the discernment of fruitfulness falls to the gardener (God) alone, not to any of the branches. It is the gardener's role to prune and shape the vine to enhance fruitfulness. All branches are thus the same before God, distinguishable only by their fruit.... This dimension of John's metaphor also poses some serious challenges to the ways in which institutional church life is

understood and maintained. For the Fourth Gospel, there is only one measure of one's place in the faith community -- to love as Jesus has loved -- and all, great and small, ordained and lay, young and old, male and female are equally accountable to that one standard. Where the church to shape itself according to the Johannine metaphor, it would be a community in which decisions about power and governance would be made in the light of the radical egalitarian love of the vine image.

Third, this metaphor is stark in its anonymity. That is, the visual image of the branches lacks any and all distinctions in appearance, character, or gifts.... Unlike the Johannine metaphor, the Pauline image [of the body] does not remove the differences among the various members of the body, but actually points to those differences as definitional of what it means to be a body....

The Johannine metaphor undercuts any celebration of individual gifts, and this, too, challenges contemporary Western understandings of personality, individualism, and self-expression. Were the church to live as the branches of Christ, individual distinctiveness would give way to the common embodiment of love. The distinctiveness of the community would derive solely from its relationship to God and Jesus, not the characteristics or even gifts of its members. The mark of the faithful community is how it loves, not who are its members. There is only one gift, to bear fruit, and any branch can do that if it remains with Jesus. [pp. 760-761]

To live as the branches of the vine is to belong to an organized unity shaped by the love of Jesus. The individual branch is subsumed into the communal work of bearing fruit, of living in love and so

