

**Yr. B, Easter 5**  
**April 29, 2018**  
**Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan**  
**St. Peter's Episcopal Church**  
**1383 Words**

**Lessons: Acts 8:26-40**  
**Psalm 22:24-30**  
**1 John 4:7-21**  
**John 15:1-8**

Come with me into the backyard of my boyhood home. Step out the back door from the utility room onto a thick carpet of centipede grass. The yard slopes downward from left to right. More than a dozen towering pine trees are mature enough to offer some shade. The far corners of the yard are accented by substantial vines. To the left—a Wisteria vine, thick as a python, strangles one of the Loblolly Pines. Down the hill to the right is a Muscadine Vine draped over a metal fence held up by creosote poles. There's a whisper of today's Gospel to be discovered back there between those vines.

Jesus and his disciples have just finished supper. It is their last supper together. They're already down a man. Judas has left the upper room. With feet washed clean and a full stomach, he has other plans. To the remaining friends, Jesus has just said, "Get up, let's be on our way." John's Gospel is not clear if the poignant words Jesus is *about to speak* are a continuation of his speech at the dinner table or a new topic of conversation as they walk downward to the Kidron Valley.

There was a rough gravel road at a 45-degree angle just beyond my yard—Bobby's Road, we called it. Even at top speed on my bicycle, the ride was too bumpy to enjoy. My next-door neighbor and I just used the road to pick up speed, before turning down a long sandy driveway easement that ran the full length of the property line for my back yard. Roger and I would fly down that sandy slope, swishing through the purple canopy of Wisteria blossoms, and racing toward a ramp we built with flimsy plywood and a tall stack of loose bricks.

This is about how unstable and impromptu Jesus' disciples probably felt as they headed downhill to dark Gethsemane. What's going to happen to Jesus out here in this dangerous night? What's going to happen to *us*? If you cannot hear their minds wondering and their nerves frazzling, then you're not listening to all the whispers between the lines of John's Gospel. How many of the eleven were thinking of leaving, like Judas did? How many of the eleven were ready to break away and find a safer Rabbi to follow?

This whole scene of two young boys racing downhill along the back property line of our yard played out right before my mother's eyes as she stood at the kitchen sink, looking out the window. Roger and I took turns seeing who could jump their bicycle the farthest. It must have been hard for my mother to watch...and wait for the inevitable falls that happen. As a parent, it's hard to watch your children take risks...at any age. What was Mary thinking as Jesus took risks, persistently challenging and provoking the authorities in Jerusalem? What was the mother of James and John Zebedee thinking as her sons took risks just to follow Jesus?

The plywood had a springing effect, helping launch me and my bicycle up in the air. When I would land, I would slam on the brakes immediately...making my mark in the sand and then swerving my bike around 180 degrees with a flourish. If you rode fast enough and jumped far enough you would skid your tire through the sand and find yourself right next to the Muscadine Vine. You could pluck a few to enjoy before heading back up the hill to do it all again.

Jesus said to his disciples, "I am the true vine..." Did you notice that? He did not claim to be the only vine. He claimed to be the true vine...the authentic vine...the real, fruit-bearing vine.

There is more than one type of vine. At my boyhood home there were vines that strangled trees on one end of the yard, and vines that produced fruit, jellies, and even homemade wine on the other end.

The night he was arrested, Jesus broke bread and shared the cup *of the fruit of the vine*, even with those whom he *knew* would deny him and betray him. He was authentically merciful—*truly* merciful—with an unconditional invitation for his imperfect followers to abide with him and be fruitful.

That same night, the Temple authorities who arrested Jesus were like branches of another vine. It was a big and powerful vine. Like Wisteria, the religious elite easily commanded peoples' attention. Like Wisteria, these leaders used their power to squeeze profit from the poor...and to entangle themselves with the strong political rulers of the capital...and to strangle dissent from opponents like Jesus.

Jesus invites disciples—like you and me—with these words: “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.”

The bad news in today's Gospel lesson is that Jesus does not give us much wiggle room to be loosely affiliated when *his way of life* is inconvenient. There's not much wiggle room for disciples of Jesus to fade into the background when *his words and deeds* are unpopular. We are either connected to the *true Source* of our life or not. We either draw our nourishment from the *true vine* or some other vine. We either produce fruit that glorifies God or we don't.

One day my mom called Roger and me inside. She was probably tired of watching us take stupid risks jumping our bikes off that flimsy ramp. “I've got a surprise,” she said as she picked up her car keys and motioned for us to follow. Mom tossed three large, wooden peach baskets into the back seat with us. The Conner's had invited us to come over and pick scuppernongs at their farm. If you think a twenty-foot creosote trellis with a Muscadine Vine is fruitful, just imagine rows upon rows of Scuppernong Vines as far as your eyes can see. Talk about fruitfulness!

I tell you this story because it is one of my earliest memories of experiencing unbelievable fruitfulness. I want you to think this week about an experience you've had of incredible fruitfulness—literally or metaphorically.

That afternoon is one of my earliest profound memories of experiencing a gift that was truly free and abundant and accessible. We were invited to pick as much as we wanted. We were welcomed to pick giant, juicy scuppernongs until our baskets overflowed! I want you to think this week about your experience of receiving a truly free, no-strings-attached gift of abundance.

Once you recall your story of receiving a free gift of incredible, fruitful abundance, then you have found the whisper of invitation between the lines of today's Gospel.

Dear people, the Good News of today's Gospel is that Jesus still invites us to live as God lives, freely and creatively. Jesus still invites us to love as God loves, freely and courageously. Jesus still invites us to be fruitful as God is fruitful, abundantly and with no strings attached. Jesus still invites us to abide—intimately—with him and with one another in a life-giving, fruit-bearing community of love.

We know there is real risk involved in being connected with Jesus. We know there is real work involved in being connected with Jesus. We know there will be sacrifices involved if we are connected to *the Source* of sacrificial love. But the true vine does not squeeze, strangle, or oppress. Rather, the true vine nourishes us so that—*together*—we might bear much fruit.

Easter is evidence that the miraculous fruitfulness of Christ is worth the risk. The miraculous fruitfulness of Christ is worth the work, the pruning, and pain.

The first letter of John says it best: “if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.” So, find your own parable of experiencing or receiving the grace of fruitful abundance. And then consider how it might just be an invitation for you to become an even more fruitful branch of the true vine to which we are connected, and *through which* we are nourished and strengthened to bear the weight of fruitfulness...for the glory of God and the blessing of all. Amen.