

**Fifth Sunday of Easter (Year B) – May 3, 2015**  
**Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22: 24-30; I John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8**  
**By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean**

**“I am the vine, you are the branches”**  
**– Love In and Beyond the Christian Community**

In the early church there were varieties of new Christian communities which sprang up all through the Middle East, Northern Africa and Europe. They all gathered in diverse ways with Christ at their center. They worshipped regularly, read Scripture and prayed together, supported each other materially, pastored to each other, and, for the most part, also served needs of those not in the church. Some communities of faith poured out their lives to the world around them. Some did not. No matter what churches developed out of the original community of Jesus' disciples, and no matter where these communities located, each was an experiment in love.

In today's second reading from 1 John we hear about one of these communities that was such a “love experiment.” This First letter of John is packed full of love language directed at a local Body of Christ. It sounds great. One way to describe this letter would be to compare it to a medical lab report. What keeps the Body of Christ healthy is the constantly pumping blood system of love, as it were. The “doctor” who wrote this lab report assures us that God who is the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of this Body will continue to keep it healthy with His life-giving Spirit. He adds that the Body must follow a few necessary *rules* of health in order to live into and to own this *promise* of health. First, it must remain responsive to the love of God by keeping focused and centered on Jesus. When the Body ceases to focus on God's love in and through Christ, it may replace that with a judgmental focus based on Scripture and tradition where everything becomes narrowly defined, structured, ordered and programmed. Or the Body may replace the all-embracing love of Christ with a more shallow or selective or insular love—or a sentimental or overly emotional expression of love—which falls far short of the real qualities of love that seeks healing, wholeness and justice within, and beyond or outside, the community of faith.

This leads to the second rule of health for the Body as stated in John's lab report, as it were, namely a responsible love of one another. John speaks of love as an extremely powerful life force because it alone can conquer the final and most impregnable stronghold which is the human heart. Love binds the Body of Christ together as nothing else can. It heals wounds. It works through major conflict and other problems large or small. It alone gives the community the capacity for diversity because it alone can bear the tension that is caused by such diversity. It can allow for real disagreement and even conflict in a community because it creates a spaciousness of spirit in which such disagreements do not threaten the bonds of relationship, and where such conflict can be resolved lovingly.<sup>1</sup> And when the power of love overcomes the love of power, then there will be true peace, wholeness and justice. Love, then, is true religion if we understand the root meaning from the Latin *religio* meaning to “bind together.” As Alan Paton wrote in Cry, The Beloved Country, “There is only one thing that has power completely, and that

is love; because when a man loves he seeks no power, and therefore he has power.”<sup>ii</sup> Paradoxically, such love is also the most powerless of powers because it can do nothing unless the other person accepts it. This is painful at times. We cease to love when we replace this difficult love of neighbor for a cozy emotional feeling among people who fear to really know and care for each other, and for others not like them and outside their community.

And so, our readings describe the two rules of health for the Body of Christ, namely a *responsive* love of God in giving our allegiance to the love shown in and by Jesus, and a *responsible* love of one another. Such is the lab report, as it were, on the Body of Christ. But we are left with an incomplete report in the First Letter of John *because* not a single “drop” of that love spills outside of the Christian community. Nowhere in the letter is the Body exhorted to love enemies, strangers, the poor, persecutors, pagans, Jews, or anyone else outside the Body, in *contrast* to the rest of the New Testament.<sup>iii</sup>

As my professor and spiritual guide, Roland Walls, pointed out, “...one of the things Christ was doing in the gospels was to show the utter futility of all these labels on people, like Samaritan, or Pharisee [or outsider or insider, or what have you]. He didn’t label people. And this unlabeled existence, without any [admission] tickets for people as they come in, seems to me part of the gospel living. You discover the new humanity [of Christ] by being accepting of humanity, and not making partitions—and certainly not partitions within the Christian church—into a stumbling-block to acceptability.”<sup>iv</sup> Jesus himself developed many relationships with those on the margins—public outcasts, foreigners, the poor, women, and the young, whose status in society was relegated to the edges.<sup>v</sup> Jesus announced his mission as bringing good news to the poor, and he revealed himself as the center of a new web of relationships—a common humanity with renewed bonds of love and respect—a new community with many of these people who were on the margins now as co-equals, and even leaders, in the center. And Jesus who stands today at the gates of our nation and at the margins of our city and church as a foreigner or a stranger or a tired traveler—unemployed or undocumented, foreclosed or poor, as a dropout or incarcerated, as addicted or infirm, stigmatized or shut out—challenges us to broaden the limits of our vision and the scope of our mission, to break down the boundaries we all place on ourselves and other people, and to follow Him in building the bonds of a common humanity.

Some Christians like to believe that Jesus invented love, but “his” two great commandments come straight out of the Torah, which Jesus and other Jews would have recited from the time of their youth. Combining them, Jesus marries love of God to love of neighbor. While plenty of us would rather be left alone to love God in private or just within a familiar circle, that is not an option. These two commandments open a door to life and to the world where the invisible God dwells at the center of a wheel of visible neighbors—and not just the neighbors we feel most familiar with or comfortable around, either. Drawing closer to God, we draw closer to others—and drawing closer to others, we draw closer to God. This is one of life’s immutable laws—there is no other way to the center.<sup>vi</sup>

In our gospel we hear Jesus declare himself as “the true vine.”<sup>vii</sup> Having said that, as the Indian theologian, M. M. Thomas stated, Christianity should be defined by its *center*—in Christ the true vine—not by its *circumference*.<sup>viii</sup> We are called to be his branches reaching out beyond the circle; loose on the edges, but solid at the core, as it were—to have our center in Christ but with few, if any, boundaries as to who is in and who is out. If we belong to Christ we belong to no one and nothing else; yet, if we belong to Christ who reaches across all boundaries, and who continues to reveal God’s purposes of wholeness, love and justice, then we belong to everyone else in the human family and God’s creation. Christ came to give us a renewed humanity and to re-build the bonds of our common humanity, more than to establish a Christianity.<sup>ix</sup>

To paraphrase former Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, the Church is the only [family] institution whose existence and purpose are not primarily for the benefit of its own members. And, as he also put it, it’s a great mistake to suppose that God is chiefly interested in religion. God is more interested in creation, in humanity. Again, Jesus came to bring us to our true humanity more than to a religion called Christianity. He came to bring us to a human understanding that we cannot hold ourselves apart from one another, that we are related to one another not only because we came from the same primeval dust of the earth but because we are all made in the image and likeness of God. And when we seek to know and love the other, whoever the other may be, we can, and will, know and love God in whatever sanctuary or setting we find ourselves. And so, what we do inside these walls in our worship, formation, mutual care and fellowship is of intrinsic worth—that is, is valid in itself—but along with that is the connected reality that the most valid meaning our beautiful sanctuary and liturgy and program [and staff] can have is the fact that they move and strengthen a number of us, as are able, so we can share our faith and values and help others discover theirs; or simply to offer a wide open embrace, and be ready to then visit lonely individuals at a nearby nursing home, or serve homeless individuals at local shelter or feeding program, or reach out to youth at risk, or to take action to challenge national and state and city priorities as they affect the poor, or to work on affordable housing and quality education alongside others from many walks of life here in the city or state; or to make the principles of love and justice go as far as possible in our respective households, neighborhoods, schools and workplaces. Without that happening outside our walls, all of what exists within these walls runs the risk of being a sophisticated idolatry and an expensive amusement, or merely a consoling aesthetic, or anesthetic if you will. Let me add that I take no pleasure in stating this as I include myself in the judgment. But on this day of the 115<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of this parish, I needed to state this as clearly as I could as we go forward in mission together. In short, where there is no love, the Church must put love, and there it will find love. The world is starving for it.

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<sup>i</sup> The love described here is, as Frederick Buechner put it, “not primarily an emotion but an act of the will. When Jesus tells us to love our neighbors, [we are not being told] to love them in the sense of responding to them with a cozy emotional feeling...On the contrary, [we are being told] to love our neighbors in the sense of being willing to work for their well-being even if it means sacrificing our own well-being to that end, even if it means sometimes just leaving them alone;” even if it means being rejected by them. (Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (London: Collins, 1973), p. 54).

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<sup>ii</sup> Alan Paton, Cry, The Beloved Country (New York: Scribner, 1987 edition), p. 36. Or, as Martin Luther King, Jr. stated, “We must meet hate with creative love...Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear; only love can do that. Hatred paralyzes life; love releases it. Hatred confuses life; love harmonizes it. Hatred darkens life; love illumines it...Love is the most durable power in the world...Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend.” (Martin Luther King, Jr., Strength To Love (London: Collins/Fontana, 1973 edition))

<sup>iii</sup> The Church is often seen through the *paradigm of family*; and because of this, creates a culture of loving relationships and mutual care, and establishes ministries to enhance family life through various means—all of which are valid and necessary parts of the church’s mission. Most of us have experienced church life that was cold and distant when this culture or ministry was absent. Some of us have also experienced an intensity of “family feeling” in some churches that felt good, but did not go beyond the garden gate to share that with those who were not a part of the “holy huddle,” as it were, of that congregation. The paradigm of the church as a family thus needs to be part of a *larger paradigm* of the church as a *public community* whose mission is to create communities of healing and wholeness, diversity and embrace, service and justice for individuals and families from all across societal and other divides.

<sup>iv</sup> Quoted in Ron Ferguson with Mark Chater, Mole Under the Fence: Conversations with Roland Walls (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2006), pp. 103-104.

<sup>v</sup> By his own example, and through his teachings such as his parables of the Good Samaritan and of the Rich man and Poor Lazarus, Jesus challenged all to keep their eye on the edge of the human circle, all those who were systematically discriminated against by the more mainstream privileged citizenry.

<sup>vi</sup> In these two inextricably linked commandments we hear that love should be the driving force of life, implying also that love includes, or brings, justice and mutual respect through the power that connects people to one another, rather than through the power that one person or group uses to dominate another. Therefore, love shows itself in many ways in our personal lives, but also in our many public relationships as we seek to be disciples, neighbors and citizens in our communities and nation and world. And so, Jesus’ summary of the whole of the spiritual and moral life, reiterating the two great commandments, should provide food for thought for the many institutions in our society in which concern for law and order, rules and regulations, policies and procedures, systems of servicing others and/or enriching oneself, leaves so little place for the gratuitousness of love or of simple caring and mercy, and justice.

<sup>vii</sup> ...as he does in a similar way a little later in declaring that he is “the way, the truth and the life” (John 14:6). An important piece of background here, of course, is the context of the family fight within Judaism that was the home of earliest Christianity. But in losing that home, the early Church carved out a new home, a new center grounded in their belief in the Incarnation of God as Jesus of Nazareth. And so, in John’s gospel especially—written later than the other gospels and after the final split with Judaism in 90 CE—we hear a determination and even a defiance to hold on to this central experience of God in Jesus against all pressures from Judaism or pagan Rome to believe otherwise.

So, what is often perceived in these gospel verses as being excessively exclusionary would be better and more accurately described in their context as “particularism.” That is, the claims made in “I am the true vine,” and “I am the way...no one comes to the Father except through me,” express the particular knowledge and experience of that post-90 CE Christian community; and membership in that particular faith community for which John wrote did indeed hinge on this claim. This claim distanced them from their prior religious home, and thus it will shape their new one. What this early church for which John’s Gospel was written did was to declare its new home, its new center. Sure, their particular claim in this gospel did, in fact, establish some boundaries. Drawing a line in the sand, these words say that this is who we are; we are the people who believe in the God who has been revealed to us decisively in Jesus. Yet this affirmation of a Christ-centeredness, of their true rootedness in Jesus, their home in Christ—of Christ as the way home to Abba, Daddy, the Divine Parent—this is fundamentally the affirmation of a center, not boundaries. It was the later church, the more established and powerful church which turned this affirmation of a center yet without boundaries into an ecclesiastical set of boundaries while losing its center of the living God in the Risen Jesus. It was the later church that a) set up strict ecclesiastical boundaries—who is in, and who is out; b)

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that determined that the Church as the sole guardian of the way, the truth and the life; c) that arrogated the qualities of Christ including his divinity to the institution of the church; and d) that replaced the Christ center with a human authority they supposed was infallible, be it a Pope or other hierarchy, or later, an infallible Bible, or in some cases, nothing at all in the center. By making the Church and its hierarchy and doctrine or its scripture the way, the truth and the life—and by creating strict ecclesiastical boundaries and thus losing a Christ center—that set the Church up for serious problems as it then misused these words of Jesus', turning a particular theological affirmation into a bludgeon or a trump card or a theological spitball in interaction with other religious paths.

As a former colleague, Mary Haddad, put it, "It's too bad that over time, following Jesus changed from being a path and a [relationship] to having to know and believe certain things *about* him. Jesus changed from being the Way to being the *what*" (Mary Haddad, "The Church as showroom floor" (New York: St. Bartholomew's Church, April 24, 2005)). The claim of these verses became problematic when they were then used to speak to questions that were never part of the original purview of John's gospel. To use these verses in a battle over the relative merits of the world's religions is to distort their theological heart. It is a dangerous and destructive use of these verses if they become the final arbiter in discussions of the relative merits of different religions' experiences and understandings of God. John's Gospel is not concerned with the fate of Muslims (who don't even appear for another 650 years), Hindus, Buddhists, or with a sense of superiority or inferiority of Judaism or Christianity as they appear in all varieties of expression in the modern world. These verses are therefore not a proof-text for Christian triumphalism. Nor do they imply that only Christians know the way or the truth or live the correct life or are loved by God or can access God. Nor do these verses claim that people of other faiths are not only wrong, but condemned as a result. No.

Here, John is proclaiming a particular affirmation. These verses are the confessional celebration of a particular faith community, convinced of the truth and the life it has received in the Incarnation of Jesus. Jesus' words and John's gospel affirm a central reality that brings us together as Christians. Again, John's gospel is primarily concerned to clarify and celebrate this core belief of Christians in Jesus. That central belief expresses the distinctiveness of our Christian belief and identity, and it is as people shaped by this particular understanding that we can take our place in conversations with other religious paths, traditions, ways—what have you—and say who we are while learning and respecting who others are and their spiritual paths. Also, to be a disciple of Jesus means not to imitate or mimic his particular actions nor just repeat his words nor simply to assent to propositions about him; but rather, to follow his "way"—to live in our day the same way he lived in his—as a sign and servant of the reign of God. To follow Jesus' way means to make his life project our own, namely to make the coming of God's reign of Shalom—justice and peace—wholeness and healing, real and immediate. And genuine respect and friendship among the peoples of the world's faiths—and a nurturing of a reverence for all life on this planet—are certainly indispensable facets of the way, the coming of God's Reign.

It is God in Christ who will complete us, not Christianity; and until that day of completion there is spacious room for many different expressions "in which faithfulness and truth wear many faces," and shine forth the rainbow spectrum of God's light to the world. And our journey as followers of Christ is therefore not to the exclusion of all other paths. With this understanding, Jesus is the way, not "in the way" to humanity's path to God—and when we put him in the way, that was never his intention. Thus, as James Carroll put it, the Jesus of the gospels "is not the source of conflict, but the source of conflict resolution" (James Carroll, "The meaning of monotheism" in *The Boston Globe*, March 16, 1999). He adds, "There is a unifying paradox. God the great other can be an intimate friend [Abba], [and] God the friend to one people can be friend to all" (Carroll, *Ibid*). And we as followers of Jesus and his way can be "ministers of reconciliation in a church and a world in which faithfulness and truth wear many faces," in the words of former Presiding Bishop, Frank Griswold (Quoted in *Episcopal News Service*, April 19, 2005, and in Haddad, *Ibid*).

John's gospel is primarily concerned to clarify and celebrate this core belief of Christians of Jesus Christ our center and the basis of our identity. That central belief expresses the distinctiveness of our Christian belief and identity, and it is as a people shaped by this distinctiveness that—knowing who we are in Christ—we can take our place in conversations with other religious traditions and paths, and say who we are, and learn and respect who others are and their spiritual paths, and from that express a "holy envy" at what we discover from others' religious experience and spiritual journeys. As much as Jesus is our center, our way

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leading us home to the heart of God, so then every major religion is a path, a way heading to home in the heart of God. In God's house, as it were, there is a spaciousness of spirit; there are many dwelling places and many paths that can build the Shalom, the bonds of our common humanity as children of God. This gospel in its original context, in its heart of hearts, is not about the business of making an outrageous or offensive claim to have the corner on God over against other ways to God in other religious traditions. When we bracket out the presumptions that Christians have wrongly injected into these verses over the centuries, there is nothing outrageous or offensive about the claims made in this chapter of John. Rather, at the center of Christianity is this affirmation of the full revelation of God in the Incarnation of Jesus. This is the core claim of Christian identity, our center, yet without boundaries, thus distinguishing Christian belief from those of other faiths, as Christians believe in Christ Jesus and that it is through Jesus that Christians have access to God. Yet we also honor what other faiths and ways offer as ways home to the heart of God. And if these words address those not on a Jesus-centered path, it's not Buddhist, Hindu, Moslem, Jewish, Taoist, or even a humanist or non-theistic path, etc. that these words are directed toward today; nor are they meant to beckon or judge or coerce anyone to change the path they are on towards God and one another whatever religious expression of faith, hope and love that may involve. Rather, it's those who seem not to have found any way home to the heart of God and to their own hearts or others' that these words are directed to as invitation.

Again, as much as Jesus is our center, our way leading us home to the heart of God, so then, every major religion is also a path, a way heading to home in the heart of God. In God's house, as it were, there is a spaciousness of spirit—there are many dwelling places and many loving paths that can glorify God and build the bonds of our common humanity until the day when “God will be all in all” (1 Corinthians 15:28; Ephesians 1:23). The earliest disciples were confused and wanted to know the way home—the way to the place Jesus came from and where he was going. They wanted directions but Jesus offered himself instead. “I am the way.” he said. The way he lived, the way he loved—even the way he died—that is the way home to our divine Parent. If you want to follow, you will live the same way, Jesus said. And if you lose your way, you can always refer to your maps and compasses. But in the end, it's a hand—Jesus' hand—that is there ready to grasp and steady you along the way.

<sup>viii</sup> Quoted in Ron Ferguson with Mark Chater, Mole Under the Fence: Conversations with Roland Walls (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2006), p. 164.

<sup>ix</sup> As Roland Walls put it:

“...it's about the real human condition. Because God addresses us as we are...not in any kind of specially Christian way. He addresses me as a *human being* [through] the very humanity that his Son took on for me...It's about *humanity*, not about Christianity. There's no word 'Christian' in the whole of [our] Nicene Creed. God was incarnate, he was made flesh of the Virgin, and he became [hu]man, not Christian. He became [*hu*]man. And if we spell that out at all the levels, we get into a kind of perspective that enables us to see the whole thing, not as a religion, but as a *new humanity*. It's about the restoration of [hu]man[ity], not getting more Christians...from Charles de Foucauld...he said this: 'It is more important to be human than to be religious.'...it is this that really [brings] alive the little phrase in the Nicene Creed, 'And was made man.'...that is an extraordinary statement, because it's non-religious. [Yet] It's a faith statement...He became man. And everything else that follows comes from that little root starting point...It also interprets everything that follows, including the 'One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.' [All that] is subsumed under that great statement in the middle of the creed ['and was made man']...that's what's been redeemed, not some blooming religious light that's been raised up. You don't need to die on a cross to get some more religion going!” (Quoted in Ron Ferguson with Mark Chater, Mole Under the Fence: Conversations with Roland Walls (Ibid., pp. 78-79, 81, 135).