

Sermon for Sunday, April 29, 2018 - "Branches on the Vine"

Fifth Sunday of Easter - Confirmation Sunday

April 29, 2018

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Decorah, Iowa

Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

We heard in our second reading today: "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love." So, love is good; we should love. But what does it mean to love others? How do we actually live out love?

Five Good Shepherd youth and I talked about that a lot when we participated in an Urban Immersion Service Retreat last weekend in Minneapolis. Our three confirmands, Mara, Kristi and Nathan, took part, along with Ava Holland and Erik Johnson. We spent a day serving in a shelter for families who don't have homes. We had learning sessions about poverty and racism in the US. One session was a poverty simulation. This involved imagining that we were the parents of a family of five living in poverty. We had to figure out how to house, feed, clothe and care for three children with very limited resources. Throughout the service and learning times, we talked a lot about the difference between charity and justice and the need to work for both if we are to love others as God calls us to love.

In our last learning session, we heard a story that's often told in trainings about poverty - a story that helped us to think about these issues. The youth and I thought it would be good to share this story with all of you as well. Once upon a time there was a small village on the edge of a river. The people there were good and life in the village was good. One day a villager noticed a baby floating down the river. The villager quickly swam out to save the baby from drowning. The next day this same villager noticed two babies in the river. He called for help and both babies were rescued from the swift waters. The following day four babies were seen caught in the turbulent current. And then eight, then more, and still more!

The villagers organized themselves quickly, setting up watchtowers and training teams of swimmers who could resist the swift waters and rescue babies. Rescue squads were soon working 24 hours a day, snatching many children each day. While not all could be rescued, the villagers felt they were doing well to rescue as many as they could. Indeed, the village elders blessed them for their good work. And life in the village continued on that basis.

One day, someone raised the question: "But where are all these babies coming from? Let's organize a team to head upstream to find out why all these babies are ending up in the river in the first place!" The community elders countered: "If we go upstream who will operate the rescue operations? We need every concerned person here!" "But don't you see," cried the one lone voice, "if we find out what's happening upstream, perhaps we can keep the babies out of the river!" "It's too risky," said the village elders. And so, the numbers of babies found floating in the river increase daily. Those saved increase, but those who drown increase even more. In this story, the

work of the villagers is a charity response. It's an important and loving response - when people are suffering we need to help. As one Good Shepherd youth said, "It was good to be at that shelter because people matter and I want them to know that they matter, that they belong." Throughout scripture, God calls us to care for others when they are in need.

The question that lone voice raised is a justice response focused on addressing the aspects of society that allow harm to happen in the first place. Throughout scripture, God also calls us to work for justice. Justice is how love is made known on a large scale so that all people and all creation have what is needed for life to flourish.

This story is really powerful and led us to great conversations about what love looks like. It requires both charity and justice.

But there are limitations to this story as well. The way it's told, the people in the river are hopeless victims, babies. Unfortunately, that's often how we treat adults and children impacted by poverty, violence and hardship - as if they are hopeless infants. We ignore the gifts, resources, wisdom and strength they have. This story also asks us to imagine ourselves as rescuers, and as the only ones who can change things upstream. Acting as if others are helpless and incapable, as if we are their saviors, is not at all loving or truthful.

Jesus offers us a different image for how we can live out love in the world - the image of a vine and branches.

We are all branches on a vine - branches that are interwoven with one another and dependent on the vine. We all need care and nurture, even as we all need to bear the fruit that is love. None of us branches can survive on our own, much less help others or show love on our own. We need to be connected to the source of life and growth and love - the vine. We need to be pruned and cleansed because there are so many things that prevent us from bearing love - our fears, prejudices, insecurities and egos.

Jesus assures us that he is our vine, our source, that as we remain in Jesus we will be pruned and nurtured and tended so that we can both receive and give love. This is the promise for you confirmations, today; it is the promise for all of us. You are never alone, you are branches on Jesus' vine. You are connected to the vine that cannot be stopped from loving you and all people.

Jesus the vine will hold you throughout your life, in every situation you face. Sometimes you'll find yourself standing secure on the side of the river, able to extend a hand to someone who is drowning. Sometimes you'll be the lone voice asking hard questions. Still other times, you'll be in the river, barely keeping afloat. In all of this, and in all else, you are not alone. Jesus the vine has a hold of you and will not let you go. Because you are held now and always, you can love others as you are loved.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.

