

“Jesus Is Our Nurselog” John 15:1-8 Rev. Michele Ward
Fifth Sunday of Easter May 2, 2021
Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church Baltimore, MD

Two weeks ago, I was in Mount Hood National Forest with my father in law in Oregon. As we hiked, we saw trillium in bloom, smelled the unmistakable scent of skunk cabbage, and heard the sound of water rushing over the rocks of the Salmon River. But what struck me the most about this hike was the site of the largest nurselog I have ever seen. A fallen cedar tree, several years ago, had become the host of eight new cedar trees, some of which were close to twenty feet in height. This nurse log, although it appeared to be dead at first glance, was full of significant organisms that provided nutrients for these young trees growing securely on top of it. Nurse logs give young trees protection from pathogens and disease, and as they decay, nurselogs transform into dark soil called humus. This humus is like tree compost, a rich substance that feeds the seedlings as they grow and as their roots strengthen and grow deep into the ground.

Being a preacher, I couldn't help but think of our Bible passage for this morning from the Gospel of John. Jesus refers to himself as the vine in John 15, the last of the seven “I Am” statements in this account of Jesus' life. This statement is from what scholars refer to as The Farewell Discourse, the final sayings of Jesus to his disciples before the Roman government crucify Jesus. Jesus had the habit of using common words and images to describe himself--water, bread, door, shepherd.

He did this because he wanted people from all walks of life to relate to him and find everyday images that remind them of God. Jesus calling him ‘the vine’ is part of that phenomenon. Jesus refers to himself as the source of life. A better translation of the Greek word used for “true” in the opening verse would be “real.” Jesus is the “real,” the “authentic” vine. This was important for John to articulate because several people were being forced out of their local synagogues for believing Jesus was the Messiah. John's Gospel must make a strong argument that Jesus is really the Chosen One, and offer encouragement to his followers.

I cannot speak for the way this passage lands with you, but I initially struggled at first to hear much encouragement in this section of the Farewell Discourse. Jesus tells us that if we are not productive branches, God will prune away those parts of ourselves. Even worse, God will also prune the parts of us that are productive. We cannot escape the pruning, whether we are producing fruit or not. If any of you are regular gardeners or work with trees, you know that pruning is a natural part of the cycle of growth for all sorts of plants. For vinegrowers, they must keep a close eye on the vines so they don't become a tangled, unruly mess. They must make sure that the only branches that stay are the ones that are high producers of quality fruit, and those must be trimmed and kept close to the main vine in order for them to flourish.

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Life does not give us any free passes when it comes to suffering and necessary pruning. All of us will be touched by some kind of pain in our lives, and the hard part is trusting the hands of the vine grower and the life we find in the vine itself. Jesus tells his disciples to stay close to the vine--to abide, to dwell, to remain--and not to become a branch that withers away or is turned into firewood. Jesus knows he is about to die, but the life he offers will not cease with his crucifixion. Like the nurselog I saw on my hike, life will spring forth from death and decay. Jesus will rise from the dead and walk among his disciples again for a time. The nurselog may look dead, but it is teeming with life within and without. All sorts of organisms and woodland creatures dwell inside. Seedlings sprout and turn into mature trees. In the forest, a fallen tree becomes a natural source of new life and renewal.

If I were to rewrite this “I Am” statement for modern ears, I would write it like this: “I am the true nurse log, and my Creator is the arborist. He removes every seedling in me that does not grow. Every seedling that grows he prunes to make it grow more. 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 seedling cannot grow by itself unless it abides in the nurselog, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the nurse log, you are the seedlings. Those who abide in me and I in them grow, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away and withers; such seedlings 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 Creator is glorified by this, that you grow and become my disciples.”

I am curious--does the statement sound any less strange using this metaphor instead of the vine metaphor? Or does it seem just as abnormal as the first metaphor did? As such a visual person, I found that the concept of abiding in Christ landed with me in a much more profound way witnessing the magnitude of the nurse log on Mt Hood. Something about seeing 8 new trees growing on top and within this ancient cedar spoke to something deep within me. I felt a sacred connection to God through this image, and I wanted to share this with you all this morning.

If we live like Jesus is the real vine or nurselog of our lives, this changes how we understand the source of life and vitality. No longer can we live and die by the myth of individualism and freedom. We cannot function and survive alone. The branches that die on the vine do so because they are too far away from the source of life, the vine. The seedlings that do not take root could not connect to the rich humus of the nurse log. We need God. We need a source of life greater than ourselves. We were not designed to be entirely self sufficient beings without a need for other people or a need for God. Jesus uses the metaphor of

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the vine and the branches to emphasize our interconnectedness and our reliance upon God.

Like the seedlings, we grow most deeply and richly when we root ourselves to the nurselog of Jesus Christ. So, I ask you, where do you take root? Do you put your roots down in the myth of self-reliance? Or do you sink your roots into the rich humus of Christ? I challenge you to let go of your self-reliance and the myth of individualism and embrace Christ fully. You never know what this new kind of life will be like.

Amen.