

ONE TRUE VINE?
A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
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“I am the true vine,” says Jesus in today’s gospel lesson from John.ⁱ Speaking to his disciples at the Last Supper, Jesus explains that “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit.”ⁱⁱ But then in what seems to be a bracing exhortation to backsliders, Jesus exclaims, “Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.” This kind of New Testament scripture has always seemed to me to exemplify the judgmental and exclusivist underbelly of so much of Christianity. On the one hand, there’s the likes of: “Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so.”ⁱⁱⁱ And on the other hand, “But, if you don’t accept Jesus Christ uniquely as your Lord and Savior, you’re going to be cast into the fires of hell and burn excruciatingly for the rest of eternity.”

It all seems summed up beautifully and ominously earlier in John 3:16, which I had to memorize as a child in Sunday School: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believed in him those would not perish, but have eternal life.” I always heard this, not as a great message of love, but in what it negatively implied: “If you don’t believe in Jesus, you will perish and you won’t have eternal life.” And then there’s John 14:6, so often quoted to prove that the only way to God is through Jesus: “I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me.”

I still remember very well an incident in seventh grade when we were raising money in my Midwestern Presbyterian Sunday school to send missionaries to India to

convert Hindus to Christianity. I asked my teacher if Hindus had any shot at going to heaven without our doing all this car washing to raise money. She responded that God in his infinite love and mercy might save people who couldn't be blamed for not accepting Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior since they'd never heard of Him. I then asked if God's infinite love and mercy might extend to people who'd heard of Jesus, but decided not to accept him uniquely as their Lord and Savior. Her response was unequivocal: "People who've had an opportunity to know Jesus and don't believe in him as God are definitely condemned to hell." At this point I said that I didn't want to keep washing cars to raise money for our missionaries. As I explained to my teacher: "The number of Hindus that our missionaries will be able to convert has got to be small. All their friends and families are Hindus and that's what they really know. It's unlikely that many of them – maybe 5-10% at most – will actually want to become Christians. Meanwhile, the result of our missionaries' work will be definitely to condemn the other 90-95% to hell for all eternity, because they'll now have heard of Jesus but not have accepted him as their Lord and Savior. Why should I work hard here washing cars to raise money to send people to hell." I was reported to my parents as a troublemaker and as one didn't have a particularly bright religious future.

As I read the New Testament as an adult, though, I find it's most consistent lesson to be one of love. As you heard in the reading from the First Letter of John:^{iv} "If we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us... God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."^v When Jesus is asked by a lawyer, as reported in Luke, what he must do to inherit eternal life, the answer is to love God with all of one's heart and to love one's neighbor as oneself.^{vi} Then Jesus picks as

his exemplar of love one from outside his own religious tradition, a Samaritan. A priest and a Levite from within Jesus' tradition leave a robbed and beaten man by the side of the road to Jericho, while the alien Samaritan is moved by pity and takes care of him. The Good Samaritan fulfills the great commandment, and he will inherit eternal life.^{vii} As an alien he could just as well have been a Hindu.

It becomes easier to understand the one true vine imagery if we understand that just as Jesus is citing the Hebrew scriptures in identifying the great commandment to love God and neighbor, so he's also using a metaphor from the Hebrew Scriptures or the Old Testament when talking about the vine. In the Psalms and in the words of prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel,^{viii} the entire nation of Israel is seen as a vine that was brought out of Egypt, deep rooted in the promised land, and then cut down and burned in the fire of exile for not keeping God's commandments. Ultimately the nation is restored as it promises to be faithful. God is pictured in today's gospel lesson as pruning Jesus's own branches to remove those that bear no fruit. In turn Jesus is entreating his disciples to follow the commandments he has given them – commandments primarily about love -- so that they might abide in his love, just as he's worked to keep his Father God's commandments and abide in his love.^{ix} Not to be loving is to be alienated from Jesus as his disciple and to be alienated from the Creator God as part of creation.

On Mother's Day, the centrality of love to our existence should be as clear as ever. What more universal understanding is there of motherhood than unconditional love? Sure, mothers fall short, as do their children in returning their primal love, but we all know the ideal -- what it means to be a mother bear, nurturing and protecting her offspring. It's not part of that ideal, though, to love one child more than another because

of his or her loyalty, to cast particular children out once and for all because of things they've done, or to punish them ceaselessly. To be a mother is to be a shepherd, to pick up on the image that Joanne Sanders was explaining in her sermon last week. We like sheep have gone astray, but the shepherd is working tirelessly to bring us home again. God will bring the exile nation Israel home again, restore their losses and shelter them from every harm. Jesus as the good shepherd will never give up on finding a sheep that is lost, just as much as on caring for those that are found.

So the image of pruning away branches that don't bear fruit and throwing them into a fire to be burned, can be seen as a process of personal self-improvement and spiritual deepening for each and every one of us, rather than condemning non-Christians to the eternal fires of hell. Even the historical Jesus himself speaks of constantly being pruned by God, as today's gospel lesson relates.

And this understanding of Jesus as shepherd and as unconditionally loving parent also helps make sense of the passage in John where Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me." Remember the context of this story. On his last night with his disciples, Jesus has told them "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many mansions [or "dwelling places"]. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?"^x Baptist minister and Harvard Divinity School professor Harvey Cox named a book *Many Mansions*.^{xi} It's about his Christian encounter with other world religions. *Many Mansions* understands this passage from John as supporting a pluralist view that the house of God has many rooms for those of many different religions. But immediately after Jesus makes this "many mansions" statement, the

apostle Thomas says to Jesus, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Then, I believe Jesus responds directly to Thomas as a pastor and shepherd, rather than making a theological pronouncement on Christian exclusivism. “Don’t worry, Thomas,” he’s saying in effect. “In the next life, you won’t get lost in the house of many rooms, because I’ll be there at the right hand of God. As you get near to God, you won’t be able to miss me. No one comes to the Father without having me there right there on your way.”

Now, I personally go on beyond the Bible text to assume that there will be others besides Jesus on the right and left hand of God, like Moses, and Krishna, and Mohammed, and the Buddha. But in any case, I don’t think it’s fair to read this passage from John as dictating Christian exclusivism. Jesus, who lauded the hated, alien Samaritan, and spent his time with Roman tax collectors and other socially-excluded people, was too broad minded and too loving to promote only one way to God. I personally accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior, try to follow in his footsteps, and see Him as my way to God. But I don’t doubt that there are other ways to God for other people – ways from which I can learn as well, deepening my understanding of my own path and its practices like prayer and meditation, fasting, and social witness.

Next week I teach a book entitled *Deep River* in my course at the Graduate School of Business. It’s by a Japanese Christian writer named Shusaka Endo. The novel profiles several Japanese business people, but also a Catholic priest named Otsu. He becomes a missionary to Hindus in India. What he ends up doing is carrying poor people on his back down to the Ganges River in Varanasi -- people who are dying without any family or friends or resources and who want to go to the sacred river as their final act, to

die there and be cremated on the Hindu funeral pyres. He dresses like a Hindu holy man, not a Christian. When questioned by an old college friend why he is doing this kind of work, rather than traditional missionary proselytizing and conversion to Christianity, he replies that this is what Jesus would be doing if he were alive in Varanasi today: “He of all people would carry the fallen on his back and take them to the cremation grounds. Just as he bore the cross on his back while he was alive.”^{xii} He goes on to say that God doesn’t only reside within Christianity. “He can be found in Hinduism and Buddhism as well. This is no longer just an idea in my head, it’s a way of life I’ve chosen for myself.”^{xiii}

The friend continues to press Otsu: But “You’re a Christian priest, after all.” He responds with these words. “When... [Jesus] was killed, the disciples who remained finally understood his love and what it meant. Every one of them had stayed alive by abandoning him and running away. He continued to love them even though they had betrayed him. After that, he continued to live in the hearts of his disciples., Every time I look at the River Ganges, I think of... [Jesus]. The Ganges swallows up the ashes of every person as it flows along, rejecting neither the beggar woman who stretches out her fingerless hands nor the murdered prime minister, Gandhi. The river of love that is...[Jesus] flows past, accepting all, rejecting neither the ugliest of people nor the filthiest.”^{xiv}

Otsu had been challenged in seminary too: “Don’t you think it was because of the grace of God that you were born into a ...[Christian] family?” He replied “Isn’t it also the grace of God when those born into other families join another religion?” As he explained, “It seems perfectly natural to me that many people select the god in whom

they place their faith on the basis of the culture and traditions and climate of the land of their birth... God has many faces. I don't think God exists exclusively in the churches...I think he is also among the Jews and the Buddhists and the Hindus.”^{xv}

For these views Otsu was criticized and scolded and reprimanded. Yet, he was ultimately found to be a worthy, committed Christian, and he was ordained. He traced his persistent faith back to his Christian mother – again appropriate to reference on this mother's day: “Since my youth...the one thing I was able to believe in was a mother's warmth. The warmth of her hand as it held mine, the warmth of her body as she cradled me, the warmth of her love, the warmth that kept her from abandoning me, even though I was so much more dumbly sincere than my brothers and sisters. My mother told me all about...[Jesus], and she taught me that...[Jesus] was a vastly more powerful accumulation of this warmth – in other words, love itself. I lost my mother when I got older... but ultimately what I have sought is nothing more than the love of...[Jesus], not any of the other innumerable doctrines mouthed by the various churches.”^{xvi}

So in the end, I'd agree with Otsu that Jesus is the true vine, but not the one true vine. As the gospel of John teaches, God is the vinegrower -- the one whom Jesus calls the Father and the one who prunes branches in Jesus himself that bear no fruit. Jesus's followers, including Otsu and me, then see Jesus as the vine and ourselves as the branches, who also need to be pruned in order to bear fruit. But Jesus the good shepherd, the loving parent, is not to be imagined as one who casts a branch or a sheep or a child as a whole into everlasting hell fire. His fundamental message is one of love, and we too are to learn how to love not only God, not only Jesus, not only our neighbors, but also

even our enemies. Only then can we be said to be walking in the footsteps of Jesus. And only then will I work to send missionaries like Otsu to Hindus in India.

NOTES

ⁱ John 15: 1-8.

ⁱⁱ John 15: 5.

ⁱⁱⁱ Anna Bartlett Warner, "Jesus Loves Me, This I Know" (1859).

^{iv} I John 4: 11-21.

^v I John 4: 12, 16.

^{vi} Luke 10: 25-27.

^{vii} Luke 10: 29-37.

^{viii} See, for example, Psalm 80: 9-16; Isaiah 5: 1-7; Jeremiah 2: 21; Ezekiel 15.

^{ix} John 15: 9-10.

^x John 14: 1-2.

^{xi} Harvey Cox, *Many Mansions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

^{xii} Shusaku Endo. *Deep River* (New York: New Directions, 1994), p. 184.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*

^{xiv} *Ibid.*, p. 185.

^{xv} *Ibid.*, p. 121.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, p. 119.