

**The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith**

**Holy Comforter**

**Richmond, VA**

**May 3, 2015; the 5th Sunday of Easter**

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

Come Holy Spirit, that through your word, and inspired by You, in mind and heart and spirit, we may be guided into the love of God for all the world. *Amen.*

### **Sacred Seed, Sacred Vine, Sacred Branches**

Jesus said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them, bear much fruit."

We abide in Christ through baptism, so there is nothing that we need to do; we abide, in the sense of remaining with Christ or continuing with Christ; we sojourn with Christ through our lives on this earth.

Prayer and spiritual practices help us to connect with what is already true.

This Gospel reading is less about what we need to do and more about opening ourselves to receive this grace, more about engaging our imaginations to consider the fruit that we bear because of our relationship with God.

Our Christian faith focuses us on relationships.

We hear that in the other readings today...in Acts: the teaching mission of the Church that brings people to greater understanding and a desire to be part of this great adventure that we call the Christian journey.

And in our reading from the First Letter of John: Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and [God's]

love is perfected in us...we abide in [God] and [God] in us.

The Christian faith is an experience of being in relationship...to God, to each other, and to the wider world.

The Church helps; provides ways of experiencing these relationships. And love is what binds us all together...God's love that has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us (Romans 5:5).

Given to us, already, not earned or worked for, but given; love given out of Love.

That love and connection is described in John's Gospel as the vine and the branches.

Living in a culture based on agriculture, the use of images from nature, from God's creation, were used often by those whose stories fill the Bible.

"I am the vine; you are the branches; see the fruit that this relationship produces." (*paraphrase*)

During Lent, I spoke frequently of Lent as being a time for the seeds of grace God plants in us to germinate and sprout.

We can think also of ourselves as seeds that germinate and sprout new growth.

And to carry that idea further, we now see much growth during this season of Resurrection as we continue to grow in the brightness of the light given by Christ's Resurrection.

Imagine the growth you see in your life as the fullness of Christ's Resurrection fuels and nurtures such growth...imagine the growth that you would like to see, and know that God supports you in pursuing it.

Here we are in the Easter season...yes, still Easter, a season that has

fifty days.

Listen to the words we use to describe church time...seasons, by which we mean liturgical seasons; when we hear the world outside of the Church context we may think of agricultural seasons; and then there are seasons of our lives, of which there are many, for we humans grow and change.

Joan Chittister, in her essay, "Seeds of a New Humanity," in the book *Sacred Seed*,

writes: "...we ourselves are all seeds....

We are either seeds of universal love or seeds of exploitative racism. We are seeds of eternal hope or we are seeds of starving despair. We are seeds of a new humanity or we are harbingers of humanities decay.<sup>1</sup>

The world needs us to be seeds of love and hope and a new humanity.

This book *Sacred Seed* is specifically about caring for and appreciating actual seeds, and a number of people from different faith traditions write about the matter show its spiritual significance.

And in that vein, speaking of people, us, who can be seeds of hope or despair, Chittister writes:

"It is a choice. A conscious choice that depends on what we see in seeds and how we treat them and whose we think they are and what we will do to keep them free and available. Or not."<sup>2</sup>

What we choose is important for seeds that grow our food, and the seeds of grace that grow God's love in the world.

In caring for the creation, in the love we have for the earth, and for those who live on the earth, we are sacred seeds, and as our Gospel

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<sup>1</sup> *Sacred Seed*. Point Reyes, California: The Golden Sufi Center, 2014: Epub. p. 14 of 101. Essays by: His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew Pir Zia Inayat- Khan · His Holiness the 17th Gyalwang Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje Sister Joan Chittister, OSB · Llewellyn Vaughan- Lee · Chief Tamale Bwoya Swami Veda Bharati · Tiokasin Ghosthorse · Rabbi Arthur Waskow Blu Greenberg & others.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*.

reading makes clear, our growth and creative expression is feed and supported by our connection with God.

Jesus was the seed; through the Resurrection, Christ became the vine for us all.

This is our Church season of Resurrection, when we are encouraged to look for signs of Resurrection all around us and to be people of Resurrection...people who are about growth and new birth, rather than death and destruction.

The seeds of Resurrection can appear to be destroyed...as when everyone thought Jesus was dead...that the movement of Jesus was dead and gone.

I found this great description of what happens to a seed on Facebook; for me this speaks of the Resurrection of Jesus and the resurrections that happen in our lives, both great and small:

*For a seed to achieve its greatest expression, it must come completely undone. The shell cracks, its insides come out and everything changes. To someone who doesn't understand growth, it would look like complete destruction.* (from Facebook, <http://tinyurl.com/pcrnps2>)

This describes Resurrection well, and new growth that comes when we least expect it.

And we are not in this Resurrection business alone....being about resurrection, is a way of being in the world, a way of looking at things and and circumstances that comes for our deep connections...our groundedness in God and the community of the Church that God has given us.

In another of Joan Chittister's writings entitled, "Living in God," found in her book on prayer, *The Breath of the Soul*. She writes:

"Prayer...concentrates the mind and enlarges the soul.

It takes us both more into ourselves and out of ourselves at the same time. By calling us to a view of life larger than the present ever can, it deepens the meaning of both the material and the spiritual. It makes them consciously one for us in a world that insists on seeing them as separate. It is in that unity that God exists in us and we in God.”<sup>3</sup>

Prayer can happen anywhere and anytime, but it is certainly happening here and now.

When we gather in community to pray, we are participating in the life of of God and in our own lives with a view larger than the present may initially present...bringing to mind and heart and spirit, that God exists in us and we in God.

What we experience here in church, causes me to think about what we have been learning about the Episcopal Church in the Episcopal 101 class meeting on Wednesday nights.

We are using an online resource called *ChurchNext*, which offers hundreds of different courses on most aspects of our Church and our faith.

Frank Wade, priest and educator, is the speaker/teacher for course entitled *The Episcopal Tradition*. (<http://tinyurl.com/k7twhy4>)

Part of our tradition includes how we see ourselves as the Church.

Wade asks,

“What does the Church think it is doing?

What does the Church think it is about?”

“Our view is that the Church is under us. It holds us up and guides us and informs us.”

Wade states that this is different from many other denominations or churches that think the Church’s role is to be “over-top, that the understandings come from the top down.”

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<sup>3</sup> Chittister, Joan. *The Breath of the Soul: Reflections on Prayer*. New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2010, p. 20.

“We believe that the Church’s role is to empower and enable a Christian life.”

As I was considering all the imagery in this sermon, seeds, vine, branches...I was wondering what an image for the Church would be, in the context of Frank Wade’s comments...perhaps fertilizer? :)

Through our prayer here today, we are reminded and strengthened in our knowledge that Christ is the vine and we are the branches, and that through the strength of God’s love for us, God’s relationship with us, we are able to produce fruit...do good works: to care for each other; the creation; the wider world.

Let us pray.

Wondrous Vinegrower, you make all things new in water and the Word, feed your people with love, joy, and peace. Lead us today and every day to the font of new beginnings. Teach us to love what you have commanded and to prune what does not nourish your creation, in the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, one God, now and forever.  
*Amen.*

The opening prayer (slightly adapted) and the closing prayer, are taken from:

Kimberly Bracken Long, Editor. *Feasting On The Word Worship Companion: Liturgies For Year B, Volume 1, Advent Through Pentecost*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2014, Epub, pp. 165-166 of 187.