

The Prodigal / May 22, 2011 “I Am the Vine” - Sermon by Fr. Bill W.

The first reading tonight is taken from the basic text of a program called: All Addicts Anonymous. It's from Chapter Five titled: “What to Hang On To:”

If you are in real trouble – if you are addicted to alcohol, drugs, tobacco, food, sex worry, resentment, lying, depression, or anxiety – if you want to recover, and if you are willing to accept and act on suggestions from people who themselves have recovered – the outlook for you is good. Do not let anybody tell you that recovery from addiction is impossible or unusual. Millions of addicts have recovered – *fully, beautifully, and permanently.*

The people who clutter up the addictive scene and make it seem like a big deal are the addicts (all of us, at one stage of the game) who do not really want to recover and who are still horsing around with the situation and mainly playing games. When you reach the point of wanting to recover and becoming willing to do what recovered addicts tell you to do, the battle is more than half won.

In the beginning of your recovery, you are so weak physically and so bombed out mentally that you are easily confused and easily put off. Therefore you have to make “*first things first*” a rule and stick to it.

The first thing you do is learn *the first principles of recovery* from someone who knows them, and to begin the practice of them yourself. If you approach them with a little humility, they are not hard to understand, and it is not an impossible task to follow them. These principles (and the company of the people who practice them) are your lifeline. You simply cannot afford to argue about them. You merely have to do them, one day at a time.... The whole program is to *hang on* while you are coming out of the woods, and these suggestions tell you what to hang on to:

Hang on to Total Abstinence – Hang on to God – Hang on to the Truth – Hang on to Your Recovering Brothers and Sisters.... These principles are the Answer you must find if you want to live.

The Psalm for tonight is modern version of Psalm 40.

I trusted you, Lord, and waited * **and you came to answer my plea.**
You lifted me up from the pit * **you pulled me out of the mire.**
You set my feet on firm ground * **you made my steps unshakeable.**
You put a new song in my mouth * **and gave me the power to praise you.**
You opened me up to the truth * **suddenly my eyes could see it.**
And I know you don't care about rituals * **or the rigid rules of our religions**
The only thing that you want * **is our whole being, at every moment.**
Hold me in your embrace, Lord * **make me transparent in your light.**
Grant me awareness of your presence * **keep my gratitude fresh each day.**
Let my song give blessing and insight * **to those who can't yet see for themselves.**
And let your compassion always flow through me * **from the depths of
my transformed heart.**

A reading from the Good News according to John:

(Jesus said:) “I am the true Vine and my Father is the vine keeper.
He prunes every branch of mine that doesn’t bear fruit.
And every branch that does bear fruit, he dresses so it will produce even more.
You are already pruned back and dressed by the message I have spoken to you.
Stay attached to me just as I will stay attached to you.
In the same way that a branch can’t bear fruit by itself,
but only by being joined to the vine,
so it is that you can’t bear fruit unless you are joined to me.

I am the Vine; you are the branches.
When you’re joined with me and I with you, then our relationship
is intimate and the harvest is sure to be abundant.
But separated, you can’t produce a thing.
Anyone who separates from me is dead wood,
soon to be gathered up and thrown on the bonfire.
But if you make yourself at home with me and my words are
at home in you, then you can be sure that whatever you ask
will be listened to and acted upon.
This is how my Father shows who he is –
when you produce abundant fruit in my name.
I have loved you in the same way the Father loved me.
Live in my love. If you follow my instructions, you will live in my love, just as I have
followed my Father’s instructions and live in his love. You didn’t choose me; I chose
you. And I delegated you to go out and produce fruit.
And your fruit will last because my Father will provide you with whatever you request in
my name. This is my command to you: “*You are to love one another.*”

This is the gospel of the Lord

Sermon in a sentence: Real Recovery is joining our true selves with God and the group and letting their love flow through us – *in place of the alcohol and drugs.*

Sermon: Welcome –

My *first sponsor* used to warn me that: “**Sobriety can sometimes be contagious.**”
He said: “*You can catch it just by sticking close to the people who’ve already got it.*”
Then he suggested that I do exactly that.

But my first time in the Program I thought I could cut a few corners and get by on a Program of ***half-measures***. So I disregarded his advice about “**sticking with the winners,**” and I hung around with **some of my old play-mates** that he’d tried to warn me about. It wasn’t very long before I had my fall.

And there’s an old story that might bring this point home for you.

- It’s about a man who’d *given up on his life* -
- A man who was getting ready ***to end it all*** by jumping off a very tall bridge.

And the story goes that some brave soul saw him standing way up there and he took pity

on him – So he climbed up on that bridge and he asked the man if he'd do just one last thing before he jumped to his death.

- He said, “*Listen to me for just five minutes and I'll prove to you that your life is worthwhile and that you've still got a whole lot left to live for.*”

And then in return – the man said – “*I'll give you five minutes to try to prove me wrong.*” And so when they'd both finished talking and when those ten minutes was up ... The two men joined hands, and they jumped off of that bridge **together**. ... Recovery **is** contagious – **but so is insanity!**

Tonight we heard another reading from the gospel of John. **And like I've said here before, John's gospel isn't anything at all like the other three.**

- John's stories are more like reading *poetry than history*.
- **John's a mystic** and he invites us to suspend our *rational left-brain-mind* and enter into **the mystery** that is *Jesus*.
- **Through different metaphors** John paints a picture of what “a life lived in Jesus” can be like.

And John feels perfectly free to put his own words into the mouth of Jesus to accomplish this. So it's only in John's gospel that we hear Jesus speak what are called: **“The Great I AM” statements.**”

The Jesus we meet in John's gospel says:

- ***I am the Good Shepherd – And I am the Bread of Life –***
- He says: *I am the Way, and I am the Truth, and I am the Life.*
- If you want to find the way out of your own darkness – then come follow me – because ***I am the Light of the World.***
- That's who Jesus was for John and for his followers. He was **the Great I AM.**

And now tonight John adds still another metaphor to his list.

Tonight we hear Jesus say: ***“I am the Vine – and you are the branches.”***

In John's metaphor, **the vineyard in question belongs to God** – God's the one who does the planting and the pruning of everything that grows there. **And right** in the middle of God's vineyard, John says: ***there's this vine – It's God's very own vine*** – and that vine represents Jesus: ***God's Anointed - or as we translate that today, his Christ.***

John asks us to try to get our minds around **that image** -

And then he tells us **who we are** in this scene: He says you and I are like branches -

We're like **the branches that grow out** from that vine.

Then, like *the director in a movie*, he starts the action.

- John says: Now God comes along and he *prune us branches back* in order to help us grow. **He cuts off all our dead parts** ... He trims us down to where we're still alive Trims us back to where our ***life-juices*** are still fresh & flowing.

And maybe what *that all means* is this – that *as branches in God's hands* – our **life is meant to be about change.**

- **Life's about *letting go* of the parts of us that are dead –**

- The parts that are *over and done with* and that we now need to put aside.
- ... *But if you're anything like me* – “**Letting Go**” has probably never been a strong suit with you.
- They say you can always see the spot in the sidewalk where some addict's finally let go of something -
 - **And that's cause you can clearly see the scratch marks his fingernails left in the cement.**
 - We cling to stuff long after its time to let it go from our life.
 - And more often than not: we're sacred to death to reach out for the “new stuff” that could come and save our life.

So, getting back to the “vineyard scene” – I know that when I think back *to how I felt* when I first came into the Program, and *as to who in this story* I could *relate to the most*.

- It wasn't some branch that just needed a little pruning by the Great Gardener so I could do a little better in my life –
- *If I was a branch*, then I felt like a branch that was already **cut off from the vine**
- Inside, I was dying – I was laying in some dirty-little-corner of the vineyard and feeling all the life-juices drying up inside.
- They say “addiction is the lonely man & woman's disease” – **and I really believe that's true.** Pruning back this branch **just a bit** probably wasn't gonna do this addict too much good. **My branch was damn near dead** – ... And thoughts of **being totally dead** were starting to creep through my sick, little, alcoholic - branch - mind.
- I don't know *how bad things got* in your part of the vineyard - but over in mine **things grew very dark indeed.**
- Thoughts of jumping off some bridge *or heading for the nearest bonfire* looked like what would probably come next.

But then – I remembered some of the *near dead-branch-cases* including that sponsor that I had met when I was in AA before. They didn't “horse around” like I had – They wanted recovery – they were desperate and so they gave it all they had.

They found their way out.

They got into contact with a whole new source of Power.

A Power, *like the psalm says* that: **Lifted them up from the pit - Pulled them out of the mire - Set their feet on firm ground.**

And **that** got me to thinking about one more vine image. Maybe it's an image that John would have used if he were writing his gospel today; especially if he was writing it **for a bunch of alcoholics & addicts** like us.

See, a long, long time ago, I worked a summer in an orchard and I learned about how they could **graft new branches onto old trees**. The idea behind the process is that some trees are native to a particular soil – and so they develop a really deep and a really powerful root system. But many of those same trees don't produce very good fruit because most of their energy is **directed down** toward their own roots *and not out toward their branches*.

- And so what the guys in that orchard taught us to do was to cut a branch from another tree – ***a tree that did have good fruit on it*** and then *real, real carefully* to make a cut in the trunk of the deep rooted tree and graft the two so they fit together perfectly.

After that – we'd bind the new branch onto the old tree using some gauze-like bandages - and then we'd **stand back** and watch a little miracle happen before our eyes.

- *Very slowly, the life juices* from the old tree would start to flow into that new branch.
- And the old tree *that had its roots deep in the ground* and had **access** to plenty of water & nutrients,
- it started to send *all of that good stuff* into the life of that new branch.
- In a few months time, the old tree supported life in that branch just **as if it were its own**.
- And the little branch started doing what it was always meant to do –
- It produced fruit – and it produced it **in abundance!**

The folks in charge of that orchard, *I guess you could say* they were sort of like God in John's story. ***They delighted in watching the miracle happen over and over again.***

In fact, they got so good at it that they even started grafting branches from lots of different kinds of trees. So you could have an apple tree with pears growing on it -while the next branch was *putting out peaches*.

- **It was a regular fruit salad right there in the middle of the orchard.**
- And I don't want to totally beat this metaphor to death – but if that ain't pretty close to what happens to us in the Program *then I don't know what is*.
- Here we are: drunks and drug addicts – food junkies and sex addicts – family members, children of alcoholics, people who really know how to worry and how to lie how to hate and how to stay depressed.
- Here we are: all coming back to life & all getting well **together!**

- Jesus says, ***“Live in my love” – then stand back and watch what can happen when you do.***

Jesus is the vine – John would say: he's the Deep-Rooted One.

He's the one who's been cut,

and opened, and he's waiting to receive us.

- There isn't a pain or a problem we have that he doesn't understand.
- There isn't a wound we've suffered that he won't bind and let his love flow into and heal.
- Every 12 Step program promises that the age of miracles is still with us –
- Don't leave before the miracle starts flowing through you too.

Amen.