

Ecosystem of Salvation
A Sermon on John 15:1-17 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ May 5, 2024

I am trying my best, but I admit I am a bit exhausted by life this week. It's not my work at St. Paul's, which is very full, but always meaningful and uplifting to my spirit. It's that there is so much troubling news this week. I spend 30 or 60 minutes a day reading or listening to the news. I notice that many people engaged in these conflicts, in spite of their different viewpoints, actually have very much in common.

The leaders of Hamas and the leaders of Israel are opponents in the war, but they have several things in common. They think they can destroy their opponents with guns and bombs. They seem to not care how many Palestinians will be killed in the war.

People on the far left and the on the far right in the United States have several things in common. They are not interested in hearing different points of view. They are certain they are right, and that their opponents are wrong. They have disdain for a large number of their fellow citizens.

The people who barricaded themselves and committed vandalism in a building at Columbia University this week hold one central idea in common with the people who stormed the capital on January 6, 2021. They think they will achieve their goals by use of force.

These people might think they are doing something new, but they are following the oldest playbook in human history. It's the traditional way of doing things. It is a human tradition to be obsessed with gaining power over others. It is a human tradition to deliberately increase our fears and divisions. It is a human tradition to use force and violence.

We are saved from these ways of separation, violence and despair by God's grace. We are saved from the oldest playbook in human history by the words and actions of Christ Jesus.

Last Sunday and today we have heard some of the most beautiful words Jesus ever gave his disciples. We have been reading passages from John 15. Let's notice that these passages were part of the longest sermon of Jesus in any of the Gospels. It's called *The Farewell Discourse*. *The Farewell Discourse* was the final message Jesus gave to his disciples before his arrest, trial, and crucifixion.

Sometimes we hear someone following the traditional playbook, the way of violence and division, make the claim that they are in a dire situation, which requires them to wield power over others. Jesus was also in a dire situation. Jesus was about to be arrested on false charges, tortured and put to death. When Jesus was arrested Peter took out his sword and cut off the ear of one of the soldiers. Peter said, "This is a dire situation." Jesus said, "Put away your sword. I am not here to follow your old, worn out playbook. I am not here to follow your ways of violence and division." Jesus' words and actions bring salvation, especially for those of us who are facing dire situations, as he was facing a dire situation.

Jesus said, *I am the vine, you are the branches. I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.* This is the goal of our lives. The goal of life for us as individuals and as a community is to bear fruit. This is not a destructive goal; it is a life-giving goal. Any one of us can bear fruit worthy of God. Bearing fruit can be as simple as two or three words of kindness to another person.

The goal given to us by Jesus is especially meaningful when we compare it with the goals pursued by the people fighting in all of the conflicts. The goal given by Jesus is not to defeat or punish our opponents, or to determine who is guilty. It is to bear fruit, to bring more goodness into the world.

Jesus tells us about the goal. Jesus also tells us about the process to achieve that goal. *This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.* Jesus gave us a way of achieving our goal; we describe with a single word: love. People are sometimes confused about what love means. One of the parts of love that is easiest to understand is the part that involves building trust. If you love another person, you are building trust with them. When we follow Jesus' way, love and trust building is the process we use to achieve our goal, which is to bear fruit.

Again, we see the saving characteristics of Jesus' way when we compare them to the traditional way. In Jesus' way the process is love, or building trust. In the traditional way, the process is a use of force, division, and building fear. Jesus' way of building trust and relationships of love is the way we will be saved.

People have many ways of building trust. We build trust by telling the truth. We build trust by taking responsibility for our actions and not blaming others. Let's notice that police officers, teachers, plumbers, store clerks, and nurses can be expert in building trust in our communities. Some of the people who have the greatest understanding of the importance of building trust are those who have seen up close the devastating effects of war and violence, such as veterans of the armed forces. Jesus gives us a commandment to love one another; we follow this commandment when we are building trust with each other.

Jesus tells us the goal and the process for achieving that goal. Jesus also reminds us of our context. Jesus says, *Abide in me as I abide in you.* You and I are dwelling in God's love; this is one of the greatest gifts we have been given.

Unlike the traditional, power-oriented, fighting-oriented people described in my opening paragraphs, we are not seeking to overturn the fragile stability of our democracy, or overthrow some other group of people. We are seeking to abide, to dwell in God's grace. We are seeking, not to be different people, but to be more of what God called us to be from the day of our birth. We are seeking to abide in God's love and grace.

This might have seemed impossible for the disciples, but Jesus assures them they are very close to God's presence. *I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you.*

Jesus does not call us servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing. Jesus has called us friends. This is our context. I have a little assignment for you. Every morning, before you get out of bed, remember this first, before you do anything. Remember, you are one of Jesus' friends. Remember Jesus telling us to abide in God's love. Rest in this relationship. Draw strength from knowing that you are not far away from God's presence. Abide in God's love.

In this passage from John 15, Jesus tells us our goal, and the process for achieving the goal, and the context for the work we are doing. Jesus also tells us the results of following his way of love. The results are extremely important.

We see the results of the traditional, power-oriented, fighting-oriented people all around us. Many people are suffering. Many people are in despair. This is the result of people following the oldest playbook in human history: cultivating fear, dividing ourselves from others, punishing those we deem to be guilty, and using violence.

We see the results of Jesus' way in communities that follow his way. Jesus said to his disciples, *I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.* Joy means that being a Christian is always a communal activity, never a solo pursuit. Joy is the result when we are abiding in God's love. Joy is the result when we engage in relationships of trust building with others. Joy is the result when our goal in life is simply to bear the fruit of goodness and love. It's an ecosystem of salvation.

Joy is important. Joy is the end result. You may have noticed: Jesus is a really popular guy. Many people claim to be reading his words and following his directions. Sometimes it seems that people are trying to make it look like they are loving, like Jesus said, but they are actually being selfish. Sometimes people will say they are really close to God and trying to follow God's ways, but it seems they might actually be following their own ways. Sometimes people will say their goal is to do something good for the world, but then you look more closely and find their goal is their own profit or security.

Joy is the critical marker of the ecosystem of salvation, because you can't fake joy. We can't make joy happen. Joy is the result of the things we strive to do and understand, for years and decades. Joy is the result when we dedicate ourselves to building relationships of trust and love. Joy is the result when we practice abiding, dwelling in God's presence, with a community of God's people. Joy is the result when our goal is not to accomplish something for ourselves, but to do some humble little piece of work that is the fruit of God's vine.