



5 Easter - May 9/10, 2009 - Year B (Mothers' Day)
Acts 8:26-40; Ps. 22:24-30; 1 John 4;7-21; John 15:1-8
Preacher: The Reverend William H. Stokes, *Rector*

It's Mothers' Day, so a very happy Mothers' Day to all the mothers, indeed to all the women of the church, who are our spiritual mothers and grandmothers in Christ. We love you and we are grateful for you. This is the first Mothers' Day after Susan's mother's death last summer. We are mindful of that too. She had dinner with us just about every Mothers' Day since we came to South Florida fourteen and half years ago. We miss her. How precious time is and how important memories are.

I sent flowers to my mother for Mothers' Day. I used FTD.com. The internet makes it so easy. I got on line on Friday night. Susan and I picked something beautiful and *voila!* my mother will get it by today. I know she will enjoy them. She will also know we were thinking of her. Needless to say, we will give her a call today to tell her we love her, but the flowers will be a lasting reminder, at least for a little while.

Still, in a few days, even if they are kept cool and in water, they will begin to wither and die. We sent her an arrangement made with cut flowers. They have no roots, they are not planted in the soil. They will not thrive, they cannot last.

Jesus said, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower (John 15:1). Today's gospel reading is from John. As with last week's reading about Jesus as the "Good Shepherd" (John 10:11 ff), it's another of the so-called "I am" sayings that are unique to John's Gospel. I am the true vine and my Father is the vinegrower (15:1), Jesus says in today's Gospel reading. It's a part of Jesus final discourse with his disciples at the Last Supper and is written with a very clear tradition and imagery of God as vinegrower in the background. This tradition and imagery can be found in places like Psalm 80, or Isaiah chapter 5, or Ezekiel 17 and 19. But there is something new here John: Jesus, Jesus as the true vine.

The passage is not a general teaching about Israel. It is specific. It is about those who are disciples of Jesus. It is clarifying relationships. Chances are that John sees the established Judaism of his day as the false vine, not living in connection, not abiding in the true vine. Please note that I am not agreeing with John about this, I'm simply observing that this is his view. By the time he wrote his Gospel, church and synagogue had split and this is reflected in John's Gospel, sometimes in ugly ways. From John's perspective, these false vines, living apart, can only wither and die.

I am the true vine, my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit, he prunes, in order that it bear more fruit (John 15:1-2). Tending vines, growing the fruit of the vines is a lot of work. It takes patience and care, and also a lot of grace and blessing.

Have you ever seen a vineyard? There is an incredible order to them. Each grape vine is propped up so that the vines, and more importantly the grapes, can be exposed to the sun and the air, and not just run along the ground and rot. The branches are pruned carefully and with discipline, and pruning does in fact, yield more vines and more fruit.

Jesus continues his address to his disciples at the Last Supper saying, “Abide in me as I abide in you” (John 15:4). A strong theme of John’s Gospel, a theme that is asserted throughout the body of the text, is the oneness of Jesus and the Father. But John’s Gospel doesn’t leave it there. The Gospel also asserts the oneness of Jesus disciples with him, and so, by inference, the oneness of the disciples and the Father. *Abide in me, as I in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine you are the branches....*” (John 15:4).

What does it mean to abide with Jesus? Today, for our lesson, we could have read from the First Epistle of John instead of from Acts. If we had used the reading from 1 John, we would have read, *Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God* (1 John 4:7). And later, *God is love, and those who abide in love, abide in God, and God abides in them...*” (1 John 4:16).

To abide in Jesus, the true vine, is to abide in love...I am not referring to soft, cozy, Hallmark greeting card ideas of love, though there is nothing wrong with these. I am referring to love that is often hard work....Think of Christians undergoing persecution and violence. The Gospel – Jesus – commands them to love their enemies in the face of this. This is not easy work. But there are other forms of love that are hard work.

How many parents who have had to work with their children through the “acting out” that often accompanies adolescence know about the hard work of love? How often this carries over into adulthood and parents need to figure out how to be loving, but not co-dependent? Love is often hard work and if we, any of us, is to sustain our capacity to love, we require something in which to ground ourselves. *I am the true vine*, Jesus says. This is the ground for us who are Christian.

I have been blessed to know Jesus as my true vine throughout my life. My mother and my grandmother and my aunt, and Molly Smith and Barbara Trippel¹ and countless other spiritual mothers and grandmothers in Christ have taught me this over the course of my life. But I am concerned today. I am concerned that we are in trouble with our current generation of children and youth. Increasingly, they are not connected to the true vine...Increasingly, they are not connected to anything of real substance or worth. Too often they are growing wildly and not well.

A few weeks ago, I participated in a “webinar” led by Paul Hill, the Director of the Youth and Family Institute in Bloomington, Minnesota.² For those of you unfamiliar with the term, a “webinar” is a seminar that takes places entirely on-line using both audio and video transmissions. About 25 of us participated and all could see the same slides on their screens and hear Paul and one another’s questions and observations.

Paul Hill has done a lot of work in faith development, especially among teenagers. He has an earned Ph.D. His dissertation was on faith development and adolescent boys.³ In the webinar, Paul was presenting current research concerning faith formation among children and youth and the challenges facing the church today as it seeks to raise and nurture them. A lot of interesting and useful information was presented and the conversation was excellent.

One part of the webinar particularly caught my attention. It was a report titled “Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities.”⁴ This was a research report to the nation sponsored by Dartmouth Medical School, the YMCA and the Institute for American Values. Involved was a group of 33 children’s doctors, research scientists, and mental health and youth service professionals from such places as Harvard, Yale, Emory, U.C.L.A., Columbia and the University of Pennsylvania, just to name a few.⁵ It was not the product of some fourth rate people with an ax to grind. This was a well-researched project by a group of diverse researchers in different disciplines. The report was commissioned in response to a recognized crisis.

What is this crisis? According to the report, the crisis comes in two parts. The authors identify the first part as “the deteriorating mental and behavioral health of U.S. children.”⁶ The authors write, “We are witnessing high and rising rates of depression, anxiety, attention deficit, conduct disorders, thoughts of suicide, and other serious mental, emotional, and behavioral problems among U.S. children and adolescents.”⁷

The second part of the crisis the authors report “is how we as a society are thinking about this deterioration.”⁸ As they state, “We are using medications and psychotherapies. We are designing more and more special programs for ‘at risk’ children. These approaches are necessary,” they indicate, “but they are not enough because programs of individual risk-assessment and treatment seldom encourage us, *and can even prevent us*, from recognizing as a society the broad environmental conditions that are contributing to growing numbers of suffering children.”⁹

According to *Hardwired to Connect*, what’s causing this crisis of American childhood is, in large measure, “a lack of connectedness.”¹⁰ The report denotes two kinds of connectedness — “close connections to other people, and deep connections to moral and spiritual meaning.”¹¹

The authors of the report state that these forms of connectedness, come “from groups of people organized around certain purposes — what scholars call social institutions.”¹² They rightly observe, that “In recent decades, the U.S. social institutions that foster these two forms of connectedness for children have gotten significantly weaker.” “That weakening,” this report argues, “is a major cause of the current mental and behavioral health crisis among U.S. children.”¹³

The *Hardwired to Connect* report caught my attention during the webinar because it was so consistent with other material that I have been seeing, and which I have preached about over the past couple months: the decline in religious identity in this country evidenced in the results of the massive *Religious Attitudes in American* survey that came out of Trinity College in Hartford¹⁴; increasing isolation and individualism and declining participation in social institutions and the fabric that makes society evident in the reports and research of Robert Putnam and *Bowling Alone*¹⁵ and before him, of Robert Bellah and his group who wrote the landmark book *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*.¹⁶

We are experiencing a crisis in this country, and its not terrorism and its not swine flu. It’s how we are relating to one another; how communities are built and function; and how values are being transmitted or not across the generations. The collapse of relationships and authoritative communities has contributed to the disease of our children and youth. It’s viral, and it’s not being contained.

In 19 years of pastoral ministry, I have observed an increasing struggle between parents and children over questions of boundaries and discipline....I have certainly wrestled with this in my own life as a parent. Increasingly, for reasons I don’t fully understand, concepts of clear

boundaries and strict, but loving discipline for children have become difficult to sustain in our culture. Parents too often seem more accountable to children than children do to parents.

An ever more permissive society has created the false impression that children should be free to do what they want to do when they want to do it and is under the false impression that this is good for them, that adults should “be seen and not heard.” We have trouble with “no” in our society, and lose sight of the important truth, that a healthy understanding of “no” is a vital aspect of character development. As a wise old priest once said to me after I had disciplined my own children at a family get-together and was feeling a little guilty about it, “Chip, sometimes ‘no’ is the language of love.”

The role of mass media, through television, the internet, “texting,” “sexting” and “twittering” in raising our children to be consumers, and full members of the religion of consumerism and inculcating them with values that are not at all in their best interest is frightening. The *Hardwired to Connect Report* raises just one more shocking alarm. Now more than ever, it is critically important for parents to take responsibility for nurturing their children in values and in communities of values in an intentional, disciplined and deeply caring way.

Now, more than ever, the partnership between the home and the congregation is vital to the raising of healthy, well-rounded children. As the *Hardwired to Connect Report* makes clear, “What can help most to solve the crisis are authoritative communities” which they define as “groups that live out the types of connectedness that our children increasingly lack; groups of people who are committed to one another over time and who model and pass on at least part of what it means to be a good person and live a good life.”¹⁷ As the authors state, “renewing and building these authoritative communities is the key to improving the lives of U.S. children and adolescents.”¹⁸

I am the true vine Jesus said, *and my Father is the vinegrower... Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing* (John 15:1,4-5).

How important these words of connection and connectedness are to us on this Mothers’ Day. We need each other. Our children and our youth especially need us, all of us, as an authoritative community of faith, that connects them to people, to lasting values and to deep meaning and real purpose in life; that above all, connects them to God in Christ, source of life, source of love. Our parents need us so that we can give them the strength and support they need in this difficult, hard, loving work of raising connected children in an increasingly unconnected world.

In this is the Father glorified, that we bear much fruit, the fruit of love; that we abide in this love and live it, especially among our children and youth and in this way always prove ourselves to be Christ’s disciples, people with roots and depth of soil; not cut flowers that wither and fade, but living branches attached to the true vine and his love. May you and yours always abide in Jesus the true vine and in his love.

1. These are faithful women at St. Luke’s Episcopal Church in Forest Hills, New York who I have known for decades and who were part of the wider network of “spiritual mothers and grandmothers” who nurtured me in Christ for which I am deeply grateful..

-
2. For additional information about The Youth and Family Institute visit <http://www.youthandfamilyinstitute.org>
 3. See “Vita” on the website of The Youth and Family Institute <http://www.youthandfamilyinstitute.org/>
 4. The full report is available from The American Values Institute and can be ordered at <http://www.americanvalues.org>
 5. See “Executive Summary” - page 4 at http://www.americanvalues.org/html/hardwired_-_ex_summary.html
 6. See “Executive Summary” - page 1 at http://www.americanvalues.org/html/hardwired_-_ex_summary.html
 7. See “Executive Summary” - page 1 at http://www.americanvalues.org/html/hardwired_-_ex_summary.html
 8. See “Executive Summary” - page 1 at http://www.americanvalues.org/html/hardwired_-_ex_summary.html
 9. See “Executive Summary” - page 1 at http://www.americanvalues.org/html/hardwired_-_ex_summary.html
 10. See “Executive Summary” - page 1 at http://www.americanvalues.org/html/hardwired_-_ex_summary.html
 11. See “Executive Summary” - page 1 at http://www.americanvalues.org/html/hardwired_-_ex_summary.html
 12. See “Executive Summary” - page 1 at http://www.americanvalues.org/html/hardwired_-_ex_summary.html
 13. See “Executive Summary” pages 1 -2 at http://www.americanvalues.org/html/hardwired_-_ex_summary.html
 14. See American Religious Identity Survey at <http://www.americanreligionsurvey-aris.org/>
 15. Putnam, Robert *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Shurster, 2000)
 16. Bellah, Robert, Madsen, Richard *et al Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkley, Los Angles, London: University of California Press, 1985,1996).

17. See “Executive Summary” page 2 at http://www.americanvalues.org/html/hardwired_-_ex_summary.html

18. See “Executive Summary” page 2 at http://www.americanvalues.org/html/hardwired_-_ex_summary.html