

**University Presbyterian Church
San Antonio, Texas
Elizabeth McGregor Simmons, Pastor
“I Am the Vine”
Isaiah 5: 1-2 and John 15: 1-9
March 9, 2008
Fifth Sunday in Lent**

The Old Testament lesson from Isaiah 5 conveys the meticulous attention and tender care with which God formed the people of Israel. God prepared a vineyard for this rootstock, selecting fertile ground, clearing stones, constructing a watchtower, and digging a wine vat, all in expectation of abundant fruitfulness. (1)

The metaphor of vine and branches continues in the gospel lesson.

In order to set the proper context for understanding today’s “I am” saying, it is necessary to back up one verse into chapter 14, I think. There we find the words which introduce “I am the true vine”: Jesus says to his disciples, “Rise, let us be on our way.”

Thus, “I am the vine” is not talk intended for a settled-in Christian community whose primary concerns are keeping the brass altar rails polished to a high sheen and slamming doors shut on ideas by saying something like “We tried it that way once before and it didn’t work.” “I am the vine” isn’t status quo talk. In any context other than a church on the move, a church leaning forward into the future, the image of vine and branches loses its relevance. (2)

As it happens, UPC doesn’t have brass altar rails. Because we are Presbyterians and Presbyterians make a rather big deal of not having altars, polishing altar rails is not a high priority at UPC! And I can’t remember a single time that I have heard someone around here say, “We tried it that way once before and it didn’t work.” (Oh well, I’ve been here 14 years, so it is entirely possible that something like that has slipped out of MY mouth a time or two, but shall we just conveniently forget this for the purposes of this sermon!) To my mind, UPC is a church on the move, a church leaning forward into the future. UPC is a “rise, let us be on our way” kind of church, and, thus, the metaphor of vine and branches is deeply relevant for us here and now, I believe.

I suppose that I have been thinking more than usual in recent days about the symbols and metaphors that define UPC and how they serve as a script for the way we live.

In a little while, we will give Phyllis Palmer a cross. Hand-carved by Thurman Adkins, it is a replica of the cross which is on the wall of the UPC chancel. We tell the story that goes with the cross every time a member departs from San Antonio and is commissioned for service in a new place. The story goes this way: on the first day that the group of people who would become University Presbyterian Church met for worship, the construction superintendent for the first

Northrup Hall on the brand-new Trinity University campus said, “Yes, I know that you have been told that you can gather for worship inside, but the building isn’t yet ready.” So chairs were set up outside, and someone picked up two pieces of scrap lumber. The pieces of lumber were nailed together, and on every Sunday since, when the people of UPC have gathered to worship God, we have been challenged to be people of faith and action by this cross, a cross whose jagged edges intersect with the jagged edges of the world’s brokenness. As we have gazed upon the cross Sunday after Sunday, it has become our script, a script calling us to live our faith as Christ’s disciples at the intersection of those jagged edges.

In more recent years, another image, another metaphor has joined the UPC jagged-edge cross, and it has occurred to me that this image too works to provide a script for the way that we live. It is the image of the vine and branches.

I am moved every time that I hear my Jewish friends refer to someone who has died as being “of blessed memory.” And so I will say that Katy Peachey of blessed memory is the one whom UPC must thank for translating the biblical image of vine and branches into a distinctively UPC script. Katy was the fiber artist who left us more than a blessed memory; she left us tangible blessings in the form of banners and batik Christmas angels and paraments (the liturgical name for the textile pieces which adorn the pulpit and communion table) to accompany us on our journey through the seasons of the liturgical year. About a decade ago, UPC was entering the first capital campaign for the congregation in a quarter of a century. It bore the name, “Preparing the Way,” and Katy was asked to design a logo. She gladly agreed. At the center of the logo, she placed the jagged-edge cross, and laced around it, winding about inside and branching outward from a representation of our A-frame edifice was a vine laden with fruit.

Like the jagged-edge cross, Katy’s vine and branches image is one that we see every Sunday too for it graces the front of our bulletin. I have come to appreciate deeply the tension which resides in the image, a tension which every faithful Christian community is called by God to embody. There is the outward focus toward the world which is represented by the vines which reach beyond the sanctuary walls.

And there is the inward entwining of vine and branches inside the church walls. For me, this represents the work that God is doing among us as the loving, pruning gardener of which Jesus speaks in John 15. Elaine V. Emeth says that the pruning metaphor works for her only if she thinks of God as a gardener who grieves while watching a violent storm rip through a prized garden. Afterward, the gardener tenderly prunes the injured plants in order to guarantee survival and to restore beauty and harmony. Pruning is not to be confused with the tragedies that overtake us, Emeth believes; it has more to do with clearing away the debris they leave behind.

(3)

A couple of weeks ago I was talking with Barb Warren. She was telling me how much it has meant to her to be supported by this community of faith through her surgery and now chemotherapy. She said, “I have received notes and cards, sometimes 2 or 3, even from people I barely know. What surprises me is how I can remember what people have written and how important that has become to me.”

Barbara is the person who has said this to me most recently, but she is merely one of countless others who have said something similar to me across the years I have been blessed to serve as the pastor here. She continued by saying “I don’t know how someone goes through something like this without the support of a church.”

Sometimes this is what church is for us. For the times that we are grieving, for the times that we are sick, for the times when we are immobilized by circumstances like job loss or divorce, the community of faith is the vine and branches which encircle us with the love which is articulated in John 15:9: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you.” And at times like this, the faithful thing to do is to dwell in this grace of a community which is the body of Christ tending our injuries and restoring us to life.

“I am the vine; you are the branches.” These words of Jesus Christ in whom the love of God abides call us to be a church on the move, a church that is in ministry where the jagged edges of the cross intersect with the jagged, hurting edges of the world, a church which both enacts and receives with gratitude the gracious pruning of a Holy Gardener who tends our injuries and restores us to life.

1. John S. Mogabgab, “Editor’s Introduction,” *Weavings*, Vol. XVI, No. 5, September/October 2001, 2.
2. Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, James D. Newsome, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV-Year B* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 314.
3. Quoted by Walter Wink in “Abiding, Even Under the Knife,” *The Christian Century*, April 20, 1994.