

Easter 5 Year B

Unfortunately, some of us feel that if we don't check our smartphones every few minutes, we will miss out on something crucial, maybe the event of the year or the e-mail that will change the course of our lives. And it is even more embarrassing when we don't seem to be aware that we are doing it, and someone brings it to our attention – often the person we should have been listening to!

A common lament, whether working in an office or as a full-time parent, is that there simply are not enough hours in the day. Schedules are too full, responsibilities too numerous and commitments too demanding. Given this, a common reason as to why we don't eat better or exercise more or even pray more regularly is simply, "Who has the time?" We can easily mishear the invitation in today's gospel passage as yet another demand on our time.

We can make the mistake of assuming that what often works well in one aspect of our lives, works equally well in our spiritual lives: in this case, the motto of every controlling and rushed person – which is all of us at one time or another – "If I don't do it, it won't get done." But listen to Jesus today, "I AM the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower." And Jesus goes on to tell us very clearly who is doing the work, and it is not you or me, my friends. "He removes every branch in me that does not bear fruit."

This image of the people of God as "God's vineyard" is a very old one, going back to the Jewish psalms, as well as other places in the Old Testament. Listen to part of Psalm 80: "You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land." Again, notice that it is God who is doing all the planting here, not us. And think of all the other I AM statements found in the Gospel of John: "I AM the light of the world," "I AM the gate," "I AM the resurrection and the life."

All these I AM statements in the Gospel of John point to the reality of God's availability. It is ironic that Christianity has the reputation of being an other-worldly religion, focused almost exclusively on how to get into heaven. Maybe you have seen the bumper stickers declaring, "Jesus is coming, look busy!" or "Friends don't let friends miss out on heaven!" It may sound

surprising, but this kind of theology of a “distant god” is what most of us are comfortable with, because it ultimately pushes God to the sidelines. Published by the Office of Communication of The Episcopal Church, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017 © 2018 The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. All rights reserved. and we can remain in control. We are very good at being busy and taking responsibility, and we rather prefer this to being on the receiving end of change. But as Jesus says in today’s reading, “Abide in me as I abide in you.”

In today’s gospel, Jesus addresses us twice with the phrase “I AM the vine.” There is a promise here. “I AM the vine, and you are the branches.” Jesus is asking each of us to simply be with him. This sounds deceptively easy. Listen to the words of the Collect for Purity, as if for the first time: “Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid.” It’s OK to relax a bit and stop worrying about hiding those parts of ourselves that we don’t want others, and surely not God, to see. We can abide with God, instead of busying ourselves to keep God at a distance.

The promise of Jesus, the Vine, the Gate, the Light, is abundant life here and now, not just in some future time. God is doing more in our lives than any of us are aware. God in Jesus is simply inviting each of us to take the time to notice. But the trick, of course, is to let God do what God needs to do and for us to get out of the way. Jesus is very clear on this point when he says: “I AM the vine, you are the branches.” That is what abiding in the power of the Word is all about, not placing impediments in God’s way by trying to do for ourselves what God wants to do for us: reshape our hearts, bodies and minds to receive the forgiveness being offered.

Hopefully, now, you can hear Jesus’ words as the beautiful invitation it truly is: “Abide in me as I abide in you.”

This sermon, written by the Rev. Stephen P. Hagerty, was originally published for Easter 5 (B) on May 6, 2012.

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