“I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” We read that sentence last year on this Fifth Sunday of Easter. It’s echoed in the Collect for this Sunday in all three years of our lectionary. It’s from the fourteenth chapter of John’s gospel—Jesus’ response to a question by Thomas, the same Thomas who told the others he wouldn’t believe their story about having seen the risen Jesus unless he saw him with his own eyes.

The question Thomas put to Jesus on that earlier occasion was couched in terms similar to these: “You’ve told us that we know the way to the place you’re going. But we don’t know where you’re going, so how can we know the way?”

Perfect set-up (not coincidental, I think) for Jesus’ answer: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” That exchange occurs in the gospel of John just a few verses before today’s reading.

On this occasion, after the exchange about knowing the way, Jesus says in effect not to worry about where we’re going or how to get there. I’ll take care of all that, he tells them, if you’ll only trust me. He seems to say, “See if it helps to consider this image: I’m a vine. You’re the branches of the vine. When I told you that I’m the way, I was telling you to stay connected to me, and you’ll be all right. The life I told you about before? It’s the life you draw from me, just as the branches draw life from the vine.”

“By the way,” he might have said (since I’m putting words in his mouth anyway), you’ve probably noticed that if *all* the branches are cut off the vine, there isn’t too much vine left, and it doesn’t do so well. So be good branches, and round up some more (or set out shoots, as vine branches do) while you’re at it, and then we all do better together. Stronger branches, stronger vine, healthier for all of us all the way around.”

Maybe that’s the life that Jesus tells Thomas about. Life is our being connected as firmly as possible in as many ways as possible. We pray together, we study together, we reach out to others together, and some of them become part of the vine as well. All this strikes me as the abundant life of which Jesus speaks, lives connected by the abundance of God’s grace.

We are conditioned to think of life as a zero-sum game: if someone wins, someone else must lose. And Jesus’s entire ministry, his sacrificial life crowned by God’s triumph over death, is a testament to the truth that God’s purpose is for all of creation to be filled with all of us doing well. After all in creation God looked over it all and pronounced it good.

How naïve, you might think. I might think that—well, I do think that from time to time. Just because our own conception is that of limited resources being divided among an infinite number of
. . . what? Takers? Recipients? . . . doesn’t mean that’s the way it is.

The stories of flood and restoration, of death and resurrection, are powerful myths (in the sense of truth-bearing narratives) remind us that we are human, and our human “bottom-line” mentality is not God’s economy. We have received stories of the miraculous feedings of multitudes to remind us that we are not God. That doesn’t mean we are worthless, sniveling underlings (we are, after all, made in God’s image), only that while we are branches essential to the well-being of the vine, we are not the vine.

We’re just not the Creators, not the one who gave life to creation, to the vine, in the first place. We might be the reason the vine exists. We bear fruit—the fruit of God’s love.

Like all metaphors, this one does have its limitations. Of course branches do eventually separate from the vine. They die and become part of the soil and nourish the growth of the vine. (Writing this, I thought of Pete Seeger’s singing, “Inch by inch, row by row, this is how my garden grows.”) And so shall we, along with the saints who have gone before, give life to new branches. But God alone knows how we will serve in that future form.

That is God’s business, and we are called to trust in God’s new way of growth. And God is the way, and the truth, and the life.

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