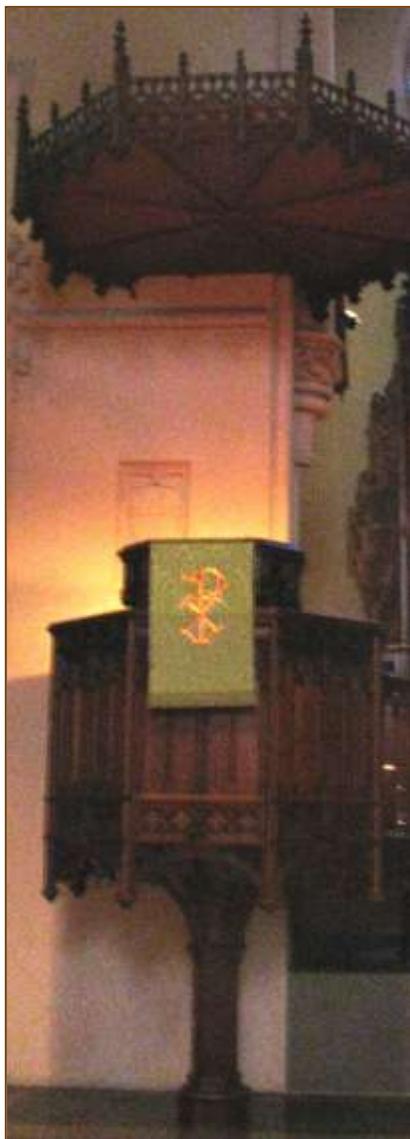


May 4, 2014

Sermons

from a church with a conscience



“Grapevines”

by

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What would it mean at this critical moment in human affairs did we in the churches show growing graces and services! A church with a conscience out in front of its age and outdistancing its own best past, in a sense of responsibility for an entire world, in its stand for economic justice, in its demand for, and illustration of, mutual honor and fellowship among races – a church with members whose convictions and characters were ahead of their contemporaries, so that it pulled them forward and lifted them Godward! Then both we on the inside and those on the outside would be in no doubt that Christ is alive and in the midst of His churches and is using them to guide and inspire the world.

Henry Sloane Coffin,
Preaching at the Church of the Covenant,
June 11, 1944

“Grapevines”

John 15:1-17

John 15:5 “Cut off from me you can do nothing.”

At that wonderful event you held for Carol and me last Sunday I mentioned the vine motif that runs along the ceiling of this sanctuary that can now be seen thanks to the renovation. It's rumored to be the covenant gossip vine, every church has one. Fact is, if you look closely there are vines and branches woven all through our architecture. We remind ourselves of that imagery at every communion service, “I am the vine and you are the branches.” In truth vines wrap their way into almost every church in some fashion or another. Maybe looking at those images is the only way we can understand the mystery that cut off from Christ we really can do nothing. That somehow a little common sense and a subscription to *Psychology Today* won't make it. That while we can decide to love, sooner or later we find ourselves withering in the troughs of self-serving. That even when we make up our minds to be charitable, the bills pile up and our desires stoked by the advertisement machines beckon so strongly we eventually have to cut our pledges. I fear we're not only a “cut flower” generation. (1) We're a culture in need of some drastic pruning.

Moreover, there's a subtle dishonesty when we attempt to commend the church to others. Writes one critic, “Our temptation is to speak of the obvious but of second hand characteristics, like our wonderful worship service with its music and preaching, or our exquisite building, or how the church contributes to the betterment of the community. We emphasize our education, lift high its influence on our children, and speak of the church's mission and mercy. There are those who have nothing to do with the churches who magnanimously say we're a good thing to have around encouraging hope instead of fear. And then there's the ultimate indignity when we say ‘the church provides peace of mind.’ Second hand characteristics with a common thread; all of those reasons ignore one thing, the church exists because it has a Lord!” (2)

The Christian community didn't come into existence because a group of nice folks decided there was a need for a new social welfare system or mental health clinic. It occurred because a handful of individuals who followed a person from Nazareth witnessed a tremendous event. They encountered a cataclysmic happening not only in their own lives but one that cut across all of history and they recognized that it was contagious needing to be shared. They understood their connection to that once dead person to be like a light bulb joined to a power source miles away yet energizing them all the same.

Like that genealogical ad on TV about discovering your family tree, little leaves running all the way down to these moments and you and me, a vine trailing its way through the ages. Think about how you got here. What parent, aunt, teacher influenced you? Who had inspired that person? Faith comes from someone not some-thing. We're connected! Which means our lives are being shaped by God through Christ, week in and week out whether we like it or not, whether we are listening or not. It doesn't matter if you are distracted or at odds with someone. The word spoken in hymn, sermon, and anthem, perhaps sometimes subconsciously, still sends messages. There's an interaction, a photosynthesis of sorts between God's accepting grace and us. Maybe it's a gentle trimming going on or perhaps at times it seems harsh and uncomfortable. Like a landscaper hacking at the roses as the owner of the house screams, "Why be so brutal?" "You want beauty don't you," comes the reply. Throughout our lives we are being formed and reformed. "I am the vine and you are the branches;" we're connected but the gardener prunes whatever doesn't produce and maybe there's the problem.

Institutions today, as most of us know them, are crumbling, including the church. Could it be because we're too much like that hermit who lived in a hut made of barn boards and tar paper in the middle of a cedar grove? Over the years the shack had started to sag to one side so the hermit cut a tree long enough to prop it up. Soon the ramshackle structure started leaning the opposite way and another tree was cut to support it. Then winter came and the roof fell in. "Won't stand no more," cursed the hermit who abandoned the shack and built a new one. Maybe it's time, in spite of our lovely architecture and outstanding worship, to start to figure out whether we're just propping up what we have because we're afraid to trust in a God of the future. I'm not

saying that's the case, but my neighbor started chopping away at his grape vine yesterday. The ends got burned last winter because they were too far from the main stalk. Maybe we've moved too far from our roots, leaving us dry and burned out.

A good friend, successful Wall Street investor, recognized corporate strategist and faithful member of his church told me of something he recently decided to do. Having headed up effective stewardship drives for six years and having served on nearly every committee and board, he said to his minister he wanted to take a year off and become a missionary within his own congregation. He would write an action plan, recruit a handful of others, and together they would solicit one name of one unchurched potential member from every family in the congregation. Then they would set out to make a direct contact inviting those persons to attend. Their goal would be to double the congregations' size within a year without changing its flavor.

It's a novel idea that on the one hand seems like a monumental undertaking and on the other something so incredibly simple I'd be afraid every church expert in the field of growth would discount it. Yet, all it suggests is that a handful of folks do what a dozen followers did a long time ago. A bunch of ordinary persons like any of you simply saying nothing about their great worship or how beautiful their building, only telling others, "Jesus is Lord, come and see" and then trusting that the Lord to do something with that invitation. This faith of ours is like an old monk who was asked if his wine was vintage. "It's vintage," he would quip, "when you have enough to give away."

We talk endlessly about membership and numbers; most churches do these days. It's the preacher's fault we don't have more in the pews or it's because the membership committee isn't doing its job, or it's the kind of music or the style of the service that people don't feel comfortable with. That's bunk, and the sooner it gets recognized as bunk the sooner this and every Christian community will begin to start building a future and stop propping up "what is" just for the sake of "what is." Like that church marquee that read "come inside and find yourself" when it should read, "Come inside and find the God who made you."

“I am the vine and you are the branches, cut off you can do nothing.” The vine dresser prunes, cuts back all those tired old ends that don’t produce no matter how they might have flourished in the past. So take a minute and look up, look around, notice all those images of endlessly weaving vines going all the way back to the beginning, even to a time when the creator of all of life looked over the face of this earth, smiled and said, “This is very good!” See the vine and see yourself as part of it and then produce! That’s the message as you select from your numbers new leaders called not by you but by God, the root source of who we are, summoning this and every congregation to set new directions that will increase production even if it means a little trimming.

I mentioned my neighbor and his vines. “I see a few new sprouts,” he eventually said to me, “so I’m going to wait a while now and see what happens.” You’re on the cusp of a new day for this congregation. I’ll be watching but so will God. Friends, it’s now the season for you to start increasing your production!

- 1) Elton Trueblood
- 2) Truman Douglass, *Why Go to Church?*



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Convinced of God's grace, the Church of the Covenant strives to be a caring and compassionate congregation, welcoming all people regardless of age, race, national origin, marital status, gender, affectional orientation, and mental or physical ability.