

The Vine and the Branches

John 15:1-8

A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter

Every time we gather together, we are really dealing with one thing: Who is God, and how does he work? It's particularly appropriate today as we look at the fifteenth chapter of John.

As we look at the general way this God question is talked about, most of the time people say God is that X in the sky, that great unknown, like in algebra, or imaginary logic, the infinite one who is beyond everything. We can't really know, but we all have our ideas. But beyond that, as people say: "There must be more," and for that we use our imaginations.

I'm all for imagination. It's one of the gifts God has given us in order to look at the world and make sense of it, and anticipate the future. But, of course, the imagination can be used in other ways, too.

Many today have apprehensions about AI. It can be used in both good and harmful ways. It's like older inventions before it – TV, the internet, cell phones. To go back even further, it's really like the question of the automobile, which is a neutral thing. It depends on the nut behind the wheel. That's what the question is.

The trouble with imagination is that our imagination is really an idol-making machine. We say: "Well, now, this is the way we think God should be. This is the way it has to be. This is what I need and expect." Commonly today people will say: "It has to be that God affirms me and my decisions."

This is a problem for us individually and as a church. In the 1970's American Lutherans voted to ordain women. When they did that, the vote was not traumatic because it didn't change the Lutheran understanding of ordained ministry. For Lutherans the pastor is not an icon of Christ; it is not about being male because Jesus was male. Rather, ministry is about proclaiming God's word. Congregations need pastors to preach the Gospel. Women, as well as men, can be trained to do this.

But problems arose when some said: "Now that we ordain women, we need to reimagine God based on female experience." One feminist pastor, elevated to high office, wrote about God: "Where are my metaphors? Where am I?" – referring to how the Bible talks about who God is. What about that? Is it that God has to be like us in the sense of who we are?

To clarify this question, we might ask, as we have before, about pygmies. As you know, they live in the deepest jungle in Africa, and they are very short so they can walk under the jungle canopy and live easily there. They are quite small and the ratio between their skin and body mass is less than ours, which means they can easily throw off the intense heat of that climate. Pygmies are a distinctive variety of humanity. Does that mean that God has to

be a pygmy? There are those who say that God has to be like me in order for me to feel included because that's what I need.

The answer is: What is our real need? Our real need is described by the problem of death. And with that we know that sin and death are the same thing, and that's over against God's holiness.

God does not say: "You need a savior who is yellow, or short, or whatever." God says: "Your problem is that you are facing sin and death. I take care of it. And I do it my way."

In the Gospel of John it says in John 1:18, speaking to this question (paraphrase): "No one has ever seen God, but Jesus has made him known." That's the point. As John 1:14 states: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father."

What is this glory? Throughout the Gospel of John, glory is about the cross. In John 12:27-28, Jesus, as he is facing the cross, says to his Father: "'What shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify thy name. Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.'" The glory of God is that he has taken care of sin and death through the cross and resurrection.

This is a basic issue and speaks to the question here. Some years ago, a feminist theologian, speaking at a churchwide assembly, said: "Feminists have really dared to hear that collective gasping of women who cannot bear the easy explanation that Jesus had to die for our salvation." She went on to say that the cross represents a kind of child abuse, and that therefore we need to reimagine God.

This kind of feminist theology, though it claims to be Christian, is absolutely the opposite of what the Biblical witness is about.

What do we say to this? What does God do?

With that we come to John 15 about the vine and the branches. Imagine that I had a plant here today in the pulpit and ripped off a few branches. After a while they would wither and died. What is John 15 saying? It says: "I am the vine and you are the branches. I have already made you pure by my word. You're clean. And you bear fruit because (verse 5) without me you can do nothing (I do it.)" Then after our text for today it says in John 15:16: "You have not chosen me; I have chosen you." Think about this. It is saying: "The Lord is doing this."

The lectionary committee, which sets the texts for every Sunday, pairs this text with 1 John 4:7-21 about love, which says: If you are my disciple, love, keep my commandments. Those who are in me will bear fruit and keep my commandments. But, of course, he is the one doing it.

What do we say then about other such passages? One of the top ten known passages in the Bible is: "By their fruits you shall know them" (Matt 7:20). You better bear good fruit! If you bear bad fruit, you know what that means. Matt 7:15-20 has a preface that is important because it sets the context. It starts out by saying: How do you know who are false prophets? It says: By their fruits, good or bad. It's not giving a general principle about how God works in the Christian life.

Well then, how about this 1 John passage, which says in effect (paraphrase): "If you love, if keep my commandments, then you can be confident"?

We want to remind ourselves about the problem of the letter called "First John." We are familiar with I John 1:8-9: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

We get the idea from this: If we don't confess, then we're not forgiven. If we don't love in the right way, God does not abide in us. 1 John 4:12 says: "If we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us." Failure to love is a violation of his commandment. If you don't keep the commandments, you're not one of his.

But consider what is said in 1 John 3:5: "No one who abides in him sins." And in 3:9: "No one born of God commits sin." What is said in the letter called 1 John is all over the map. How does it work? These conflicting messages sit side by side in the same book. It then becomes a question of how we understand and use Scripture and how we come to what we say about God. This is a very basic matter.

It is easy to fall into one ditch or another. One ditch is to say: First God does something, and then we've got to do the rest. But as it says in John 15:16: He has done it. it's not that we chose him; he has chosen us. He has made us clean through his word. Without him we can do nothing.

We can fall into the other ditch and say, as Paul does mockingly in Romans 6:1 and 15 (and 3:8): "Now let us sin that grace may abound." Does the Gospel mean that we can do as we please, that it doesn't matter what we do because he is doing it all? By no means.

When we fall into these ditches, we have misunderstood the basic message. It comes to be a basic question of whether the center of the Christian faith is in the cross and resurrection or not – over against feminist theologians and all those who reimagine God in their image or by some other criteria.

We, then, as those who confess the Christian faith in the Reformation tradition, say that the center of our faith is that God has come to die for us on the cross and rose again because that was the only way it could be done, and he did it, as John 19:30 says: "It is finished."

Thank God. And it doesn't depend on our thinking, our feelings, our imaginations, or our works. Thank God.

We have that kind of certainty, by which we mean confidence in the Lord, that he has taken care of things and that therefore we are free. Amen