

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 3, 2015

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Today's gospel is the beautiful allegory of the vine and its branches. Jesus gave this teaching in the Temple precincts after the Last Supper. The disciples were following their Master on the way to Gethsemane. Context is everything! Passing the Temple these men would have seen the great golden vine with clusters of grapes that crowned the portal of the Temple porch. The golden vine was a recognized symbol of Israel.

When Our Lord said, "I am the Vine," He was plainly declaring, "I am Israel." The purpose of God entrusted to Israel (of which the Old Covenant is the historic record) was in fact being fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He is the true Israel, the faithful remnant, and in His Own Person He is the whole people of God.

The culminating inspiration in the Old Testament had been declared in Isaiah chapter 53, where the perfect response by Israel to Almighty God will be given (and the divine purpose fulfilled) *by one individual*. The whole significance of Israel would be concentrated in Him. "I am the Vine" was ringing in the ears of our Christian forebears. They knew it was no accident that Christ came out of Egypt (Mt. 2:15) in fulfillment of the Psalm, "Thou hast brought a *vine* out of Egypt." (Psalm 80.8)

Christ is the Vine. Notice He does not say He is simply the stem. He is *the entire plant*. Christ includes in Himself every tiny shoot and each new graft. That is where we come into the picture. We call the tiny shoots and the grafts by different names: baptism and reception into full communion. There are many explanations about our relationship to Christ and each other. There are many explanations about the themes of free will and destiny of fate. But none of them goes to the heart of the matter in a more vivid and understandable way than in the allegory given us in those few minutes on the path from the Cenacle to Gethsemane. As God Incarnate gives His take on the vine, it is as if we suddenly realize the natural laws of botany are a lower reflection of the higher or supernatural bond between Christ and His Church.

You will never get any benefit from my limited knowledge of botany! My qualifications ended with a year and a half of college biology. But like many of

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you I do a bit of work in the yard. So I appeal to what we all know. A branch of a vine has a certain freedom of movement. It can sway in the breeze. It produces leaves. It can grow in a certain direction. The branch also has the duty of sharing its production with the rest of the vine. That is called photosynthesis. In return, the branch receives from the vine food and physical support. If the branch does not participate in the life of the vine it dies. During May, we have a special yard waste collection on trash day. You can bundle up sticks and dead branches and put them curbside for pickup. Just from doing yard work we realize the branch is totally dependent upon the vine for its well-being and that the vine is not dependent upon the branch to nearly the same degree. The branch can do many things. But all of its accomplishments, the flowers, the new green leaves, and the fruit, would be impossible without the support system of the vine. There is no life left in the branches bundled for curbside pickup! The freedom and autonomy enjoyed by the branch are dependent upon its being incorporated into the vine. Being true to our destiny, which is incorporation in Christ, undergirds and brings about the free will we enjoy. "His service is perfect freedom."

Blessed Jesus did not use a modern speak! He didn't say, "I am the larger life system of which you are a part." No concept is clearer and more enduring than His allegory of the vine, acted out in nature not only in first century Palestine but also in the blaze of spring color we are enjoying right now in Boston after a harsh winter.

Those who are bound to Christ realize their lives are taken up into His, and that we are bound by higher (super)natural laws of being and love. We respond by striving, with His grace, to do certain things. We act this way because we are aware of our connection to Him. As God gives us the light, each one exercises free will in a conscious response, trying to serve and support the whole Body of Christ. In this way, just like the branch of the vine, you and I are a part of the larger whole. Yet at the same the One Who said, "I am the Vine" also declared He is the Good Shepherd. Our relationship with the Lord Jesus is not duplicated anywhere else. A soul is not a stick or a twig, whether connected to the vine or bundled by the curb. A soul is a precious individual in Christ's eyes, now and forever.

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