

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 10, 2015

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Last Sunday we heard Our Lord Jesus proclaim, “I am the vine.” It was something His followers would understand. The Lord was saying, “I am not the roots or the main stem but *the whole vine*. Therefore to be a branch of the vine is to be part of Christ, not just attached to Him but a *part* of Him.

Many of you have had the experience of touring a vineyard and ending up in the wine tasting shop. Or maybe you start in the wine-tasting shop! Over the years travelling to and through western New York we have stopped at vineyards in the Niagara escarpment region in Ontario. This is one of those places in the world where soil and climate conditions are perfect for growing grapes. But when you visit, especially in summer, none of the vines looks healthy. They are all gnarly and scraggly. The way they are trussed up on wires and laden with clusters of grapes makes a stark appearance. More than one person over the centuries has thought a grapevine takes on *the shape of a man hanging on a cross*. So after you visit the wine shop visit the grapes! And see if this thought occurs to you.

Despite the appearance, a grapevine is nearly impossible to kill. It actually flourishes when it is pruned back and has the non-bearing branches cut off. It profits from being subjected to a harsh and hot growing season after spring rains. This all contributes to the deathly look of the vine but also produces the very intense concentration of grape juice which can ferment into first-class wine.

In Saint John’s Gospel chapter fifteen the Lord Jesus says in effect, “I am like that. I am a vine which appeared to be dead but springs forth to cover the earth. And you disciples of mine are part of that growth. By being connected to the vine you have the sustaining power of its life in you.” A result of this connection is that when we ask for things “In His Name” we are not invoking some magic word out of a recipe book! Jesus sets the context of our asking within His teaching about the vine and the branches. The asking we do is done *as part of the vine*.

In natural law a branch of a vine cannot ask for anything that is not according to the will of the whole plant. In the same way, in higher (or super) natural law branches of the vine that is Christ will ask for things according to His will, which is according to what Jesus wants to give us.

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Much of the time we do the very opposite! Then we are surprised by the answers (sometimes which seem *non*-answers) to our prayers. We approach the Lord in prayer as if we were trying to change His mind or get Him to do something He doesn't want to do! That is not being part of the vine. The sinful man is like a branch severed from the vine. Because severed, he asserts things contrary to the vine. Such a person may pray, but he is actually asking for things which separate him from Christ. And it is a sign of the Lord's kindness that His answers to such prayer never harm the relationship to Him. The Lord never answers wrong prayer by directing a sinner to jump in front of a streetcar!

As part of the vine we are to ask for what Jesus already desires to give, and the bestowal of which will bind us more closely to Him. The Lord desires to draw you and me ever closer to Him. True prayer has cognizance that it is asked from within the life of Christ Whose love holds all things together. That is why it has been well said, "The petitions of a true disciple are echoes of Christ's words"