

May 14, 2006
Isaiah 5:1-7, John 15:1-11
Dr. Lewis F. Galloway

"The Source of our Strength"

We like to do things ourselves. We like to be in control. We like to be autonomous creatures. We don't want to have to depend on anyone. We think that, given enough time or enough resources, we can accomplish by ourselves anything we want to accomplish. We don't want anybody telling us what to do. It is hard for us to admit that we need anybody or that we are bound to anyone.

Maybe that is why something in us resists these words of Jesus, "I am the vine and you are the branches... Apart from me you can do nothing." The words of Jesus run against the grain of our culture. We aspire to greater levels of freedom, autonomy and independence. These can be the very things that get us into trouble. God made us to live in community with one another and with God. We cannot live an abundant life without healthy relationships with our families, our friends and our neighborhoods. When the communities in which we live break apart, all of our lives are diminished. When we live apart from God, when we have no spiritual life or when our relationship with Jesus is broken, we wither and die.

Isaiah compared the whole people of Israel to a vineyard carefully and lovingly cultivated by the vinedresser. The vinedresser did everything possible to cultivate the vineyard so that it would produce the best grapes. He chose a fertile land. He cleared and plowed the fields. He planted the best vines. He built a tower from which he could watch over the vineyard. He waited to see what would happen. The vineyard produced wild grapes. God, who planted the people of Israel, expected the people to produce a harvest of justice and righteousness. Turning their backs to the source of their life, the people brought forth a harvest of evil - bloodshed, iniquity, injustice and oppression. Cut off from the source of their strength, the people perish. The vineyard is destroyed and abandoned.

Many people I know feel their lives are missing something - some degree of meaning, some vitality, some sense of peace or feeling of purpose. They are busy; but their activities feel more like busyness than true vocation. They have friends; but the friendships never get beyond talking about sports, work, kids or the weather. They are not satisfied with the bits and pieces of their lives...pieces which never seem to come together to make one whole life. Life seems to be wasting away, drying up or dying from the inside out.

Being connected to the source of our strength means letting go of our illusions of autonomy, our false sense of control, our foolish notions of self-sufficiency, long enough to recognize the true source of our strength. Isn't it odd? Strength comes by admitting our weakness; security comes by letting go; and freedom comes by recognizing that we are bound to Christ.

Today we are receiving our 2006 confirmation class. The young men and women in this class have spent the year studying, serving, playing and growing together into one community. They are experiencing what it means to be the body of Christ together. This past Wednesday evening, they met with the Session of the church and shared their faith stories. Each confirmand was presented with a Bible, in which Brian Shivers, our youth minister, had inscribed a verse of Scripture especially chosen for each youth. Dr. Malick blessed each one of them, anointing them with oil.

Each one of our confirmands has different gifts; but, together, they are united in the body of Christ.

Jesus promises that, when we abide in him, we will find our true life. We will flourish, bloom and bear much fruit. Today, we will pray that these young people will bear much fruit for Christ. To be productive is not easy. Sometimes, God prunes us to bear more fruit. All through our lives we experience times when we do not get what we want, when it seems that we have lost more than we have gained and when God seems to be asking too much of us.

Sometimes, what God asks of us seems impossible. In his book, *A Whole New Life*, the writer Reynolds Price tells of his long battle with spinal cancer. He suffered not only from the effects of the cancer but also from the side effects of the radiation. He was losing control of his legs. Untouchable pain and paralysis were real possibilities. Once, he woke up in the middle of the night and thought about his "somber prospects." Reynolds Price writes:

"In that black trough I remember looking up to the ceiling and addressing what I must have thought was God... 'How much more do I take?'... A long silent pause, then a voice at normal speaking strength said the one word 'More.'" (p.80) The next day a friend's minister came to offer him communion. As he swallowed the bits of bread, he said he "experienced again the almost overwhelming force which has always felt to me like God's presence. Whether the force would confirm my healing or go on devastating me, for the moment I barely cared. No prior taste in my old life had meant as much as this new chance at a washed and clarified view of my fate." (p. 81) At that moment, Price touched again the source of his strength.

As a minister, there have been times in my life when I have looked at what other people were doing and wondered whether or not I was doing the right thing with my life. I remember going to my tenth college reunion. On the second day of the festivities, I found myself getting depressed. It was not that I was miserable or bored. We were having a great time. Yet, I was with friends who seemed to have more control over their time and who talked about going away for weekends or being home in the evenings. I was with friends who appeared to have more freedom than I did about what they could say or do. I realized that I envied their freedom. A part of me felt trapped. God was asking too much.

I know that I was only seeing their lives as they appeared to others from the outside. I was so focused on myself that I did not see the struggles, the pain, the fear and the bitter disappointment that were surely in their own hearts. God used that moment to prune away some of my illusions, trim off some of my selfish desires, cut back some of my

foolishness. It was a time in my life when I seemed to have forgotten the joy of my calling - of being with people in times of celebration, of sharing faith in times of suffering, of experiencing the presence of Christ in others, of discovering the Word of God as a life-giving power and of living together in the community of faith. I rediscovered the source of my strength.

In the years to come, our youth who are confirming their faith today will face such times as well. You will wonder about your purpose in life. You will look at what other people are doing and how they are living and you will wonder about your own life. You will question your faith; your decision to follow Jesus will be tested time and again; your relationship with Christ will continue to grow and to be transformed. I charge you to remember this moment. Remember that Jesus Christ is the source of your strength. He is the vine who gives life to us all. We are the branches that are rooted and grounded in him.

Jesus Christ is the source of our strength who gives us a vision of ministry and gives us the strength to do everything the Lords asks of us. Jesus said, "I am the vine and you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit." He is the source of our strength.