

“Sunday words” and a worship service for the Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 2, 2021....

Good morning from a chilly, cloudy hill in Rockport.... where the birds continue to sing us into a new day....

The focus in our worship service this morning is the metaphors of the Bible, specifically as they appear in John 15:1-8. A vine and branches – Jesus is the vine, we are the branches....

So, I’ve been thinking about metaphors of all kinds this week. My friend, Lisa, suggests this one: sometimes a challenging situation “looms like a tumbleweed in the winds of life.”

Here’s another: “In music, you can use metaphors with ease – if a person doesn’t understand the parable, they can still enjoy the melody of the music. If, however, a person reads a book and misses the meaning of its metaphors, this will be extremely disheartening for both the reader as well as the author.” ~ Cat Stevens, singer, songwriter, musician

And this: “Metaphors are dangerous, Metaphors are not to be trifled with. A single metaphor can give birth to love.” ~ Milan Kundera, Czech writer

And this: “Metaphor lives a secret life all around us. We utter about six metaphors a minute.” ~ James Geary, American writer

And this: “Cities are obvious metaphors for life. We call roads ‘arteries’ and so forth.” ~ Geoffrey West, theoretical physicist

And this: “Why would one ever be so insane as to ditch a perfectly beautiful metaphor? Cut back, of course, prune if you like, so that the best metaphors are clear and sparking. But I will throw out unread the book that promises me no metaphors inside.” ~ Marie Rutkoski, American writer

And this: “Love is like a never ending road.... Once you’ve traveled it, you never forget it.” ~ Susan Stonestreet, pastor and preacher

And finally: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower.” ~ John 15:1

Blessings to each one this fifth Sunday of Easter morning.... Susan

p.s. I’ll copy below the worship bulletin from this morning’s service and following it, the text from the Gospel of John we’ll consider this morning, and my sermon. I will post the text and my sermon on my Facebook page, [freerangepastor](https://www.facebook.com/freerangepastor), and on the church’s Facebook page, the Federated Church of Thomaston, later today.... And my amazing webmaster, Phil, also posts these complete “Sunday words” on my website [www.freerangepastor.org](http://www.freerangepastor.org) under the sermon archives tab.

p.s.s. Let Alice or me know if you have suggestions for hymn choices or other music for our worship services.... We’ll do our best to meet your needs and desires....

p.s.s.s If there is a large space separating parts of these “Sunday words”.... just ignore it.....  
some days the vagaries of computer writing are beyond me....

**Federated Church in Thomaston**  
**United Church of Christ    United Methodist Church**  
**All Are Welcome**

**Sunday, May 2, 2021 – Fifth Sunday of Easter**

Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet, Pastor    Alice Billheimer, Organist/ Choir Director

Lector: Laci DeVarney

*Please be respectfully silent once our worship service has begun.*

*An asterisk (\*) indicates where you are invited to stand.*

***Bold print*** indicates that the people speak these responses & prayers.

**GATHERING FOR WORSHIP**

**Welcome and Announcements**

~ Thanks to Ron for offering our Special Music today

~ We will share in Holy Communion today, in a different way than usual, but in keeping with covid protocols. Perhaps next month we can move back to our usual way of sharing in HC.

~ It is the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of the month, so feel free to drop your change into the plates as you leave, along with your regular offerings!

~ Also, Laci has asked me to announce that her mother, April's, graveside service will be this coming Wednesday, May 5<sup>th</sup> at 3:30 in Achorn Cemetery on Old County Road in Rockland. You are welcome to join Laci and her family for this service.....

**Prelude** Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life -- meditation on a hymn melody

**Call to Worship**

Leader: We gather as followers of Jesus,

**People: who embodied love and showed us how to be the very presence of God.**

**All: May our faith deepen beyond personal piety and mere tradition to become the story we tell with every breath of our lives. Let us worship God!**

**\*Opening Hymn** “Take Time to Be Holy” (see insert)

**An Invocation....**

Eternal God, be among us in this hour as we offer you our prayers, our singing, our hopes and ourselves. We begin again in the name of the one and the many you have sent to show us the way to new life in you this day. Amen.

**A Moment of Silence**

**Special Music** Offered by Ron Anderson

**SERVICE OF THE WORD**

**Scripture Reading** John 15:1-8

**\*Gloria Patri**

**Message** “*Abide in me as I abide in you.*” Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet

**RESPONDING IN FAITH5**

**Sharing Our Joys and Concerns with God and Each Other**

**Pastoral Prayer**

**The Lord’s Prayer.....**

**Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, Amen.**

**Offertory**

(Offering plates are placed in the back of the sanctuary. Thank you!)

**\*Doxology** No. 95 Blue

**\*Prayer of Dedication**

**\*Hymn of Preparation** “Let Us Break Bread Together” (see insert)

**A Service of Holy Communion** (see insert)

We will share in receiving the Bread and the Cup by coming forward by rows. Susan will serve each one individually and will go to those unable to come forward. Please feel free to not partake in this ritual if you do not feel comfortable doing so. We offer this *traditional* way of sharing in holy communion while we await an end to the pandemic so we can resume our *usual* way of sharing in this holy meal. No kneeling is required!

**\*Closing Hymn** “Leaning On the Everlasting Arms” (see insert)

**Benediction**

**Postlude** For All the Saints -- fanfare based on the hymn tune "Sarum"

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**Revised Common Lectionary Readings for Sunday, May 9, 2021**  
**The 6th Sunday of Easter & Mother’s Day**  
**Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98; 1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17**

**PRAYER LIST**

**Hold** in your prayers all those affected by the corona virus and the families of those who have died from the virus.... **And** all those families affected by the use of addictive drugs and alcohol among their members.... **And** all those dealing with the ravages of cancer near and far..... **And** add to our prayers, from Blair a request for prayers her friend Judith on the passing of her daughter, Lani, 42, from brain cancer, from Jackie a request for prayers for Kyle Cloudier, deep prayers for Hank and Lucy as Hank endures his cancer journey with the help of Hospice and for “Cody,” who doesn’t live locally but needs prayers for guidance; Enid, Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Fred Bagnall, Harriet Williams, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, Sally Harjula Elliot, Trish

Perry, Helmut Steger, John Flaherty, Doug and BJ Thomson, Heather Van Buskirk, and Michael and Gail in southern Maine

*Please feel free to contact Susan by phone (207)322-1948 or by email [freerangepastor@gmail.com](mailto:freerangepastor@gmail.com) to add or drop the names from the prayer list.*

**ANNOUNCEMENTS**

Monday-5/3/21.....6:30-8:00 pm: Troop Meeting

Tuesday-5/4/21.....4:00 -6:00 pm: Weight Watchers

Sunday-5/9/21.....9:30 am: Worship Service

Suggested Food Pantry Donation.....Canned Vegetable

The flowers this week are given by Hank and Lucy Carey in loving memory of their mothers-

Carrie Carey and Elizabeth

Haynes.

Deacon for May 2021: Dave Billheimer and Doug Schroeder

Reminders for next Sunday, 5/9/21

Greeter/Usher: Doug Schroeder & Kurt

Leidenroth

Coffee

Host:

Lec

tor: Doug

Schroeder

Flowe

rs: Muriel Pinkham

Collection Total for Sunday, April 25, 2021:

Pledges - \$ 440.00

Loose - \$ 23.00

Total - \$ 463.00

**Federated Church of Thomaston  
United Church of Christ  
&  
United Methodist Church  
Together Since 1929**

***Fifth Sunday of Easter***

**“Abide in me as I abide in you.”**  
**A Sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston**  
**Thomaston, Maine**  
**Sunday, May 2, 2021**  
**Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet**  
**Scripture: John 15:1-8**

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”  
John 15:1-8

Will you pray with me. O God of metaphor and life, open our ears and our minds to appreciate the power of “likeness” and so the truth in the vineyard of our lives. May my words reveal your wisdom in some modest way this day. Amen.

Let’s start off with a question. Is it easier to think of Jesus as a shepherd or as a grape vine? The author of the Gospel of John seems to be enamored with the idea of presenting Jesus using a variety of dramatic images from the natural world.

Last Sunday we focused on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm which begins “The Lord is my shepherd.” We didn’t specifically focus on the text from the Gospel of John for

last Sunday which speaks of Jesus as the divine shepherd guarding and tending his flock.... that is his followers.

Today we hear of Jesus as “the true vine.” His followers are the branches of that vine that either produce fruit or are thrown away.

Which of these images makes more sense to you will color, or perhaps be colored, by how you envision your relationship with Jesus. Are you a sheep in Jesus’ flock or a branch on Jesus’ vine? Or do you see your relationship with Jesus in another way entirely?

Metaphors take two unlikely objects or ideas and illuminate the similarities between them. They accomplish in a word or a phrase what could otherwise be expressed only in many words, if at all.<sup>[1]</sup>

To think metaphorically is to see connections where none would logically or realistically exist.... but thinking in this way opens up whole new avenues to understand life.... and to understand faith.... as long as we remember that metaphors offer us ways to *interpret* and *understand* something, not accept them as historically accurate, factual events or concepts. We are NOT sheep, nor are we branches, literally....

One of the best things about the Bible, to me anyway, is that it gives us the opportunity to choose the ways we understand our faith in God and our commitments as Christians. Reading the Bible allows for *our* sensitivities and experiences to become a part of the story historically and realistically, but it also calls our attention to consider our faith *metaphorically* in new and unexpected ways. Just as sheep herding was far more common in the late first century than it is for us, so it goes with tending vineyards, not the common way of life now as it was then. We have to stretch our minds a bit to consider these images seriously and personally.

I find the longer I’m in ministry, the more I’m learning about farming and such in preparing sermons! I grew up in suburbia – the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C. – so my sensitivities and experiences lend themselves to book learning and study, not to farm life. So I have to work hard at seeing Jesus as either a shepherd or a vine and myself as either a sheep or the branch of a vine. That wouldn’t have been so difficult were I living in the late first century.

But I’ve learned that tending a vineyard then “required long-term intensive care. The soil was first dug and cleared of stones and a wall (or hedge) erected to discourage predators. A watchtower and winevat completed the installation, with a booth for lodging during the harvest. Vines required heavy annual pruning,

hoeing, thinning and support of fruit clusters, and sometimes irrigation. Intensive labor heightened the expectation of the harvest and made loss of vintage a bitter disappointment... Israel accepted the vine and its fruit as gifts of the Lord, not the land. And Israel itself was likened to a vine, planted and tended by God.”<sup>[2]</sup>

So, you can see that using the image of vinegrower, vine and branches to explain the relationship between God, Jesus and his followers was entirely appropriate in the late first century. How can we make good sense of it now, 2,000 plus years later? Perhaps the answer lies in a verb.

Jesus says, “Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.” (John 15:4) “To abide,” in Greek is MEN-o. It means “to stay – in a given place, state, relation or expectancy, or to continue, dwell, endure, be present, remain, or stand for.”<sup>[3]</sup>

To abide in some *place* is to stay there. To abide in some *one* is to stay in relation with them. To abide in faith is to stay in a state of expectancy. The verb “abide” is used eight times in the eight verses of our Scripture passage from the Gospel of John this morning. That’s important. Abiding is important. We need to do a lot of it. We abide in this place – this church, this sanctuary. We abide in one another – in this congregation. And we abide in God – in the work and in the mission and in the faithful expectancy that lives here.

Without us, the church is just a building. Without the church, we’re just a group of people looking for a place to meet on Sunday mornings. Without faith, neither the church nor the group have any purpose. Jesus said, “I am the vine you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5)

Nothing gets done when faith is missing from our relationships and our actions. No, that isn’t to say that nothing happens when faith is missing – LOTS of things happen – we may lose our way, we may get angry, we may become fearful, we may live without purpose, although some of us fight that tooth and nail. I know I did for the first half of my life. I thought I was filled with purpose. But I couldn’t figure out where I was going.... purposefully.

It helps to recognize that we are a part of something bigger than we are. It’s comforting and reassuring to know that we’re not in this life individually and alone. Metaphorically, we might say, as did the writer of the Gospel of John, that it’s good to be a branch of a healthy vine that is well tended by a loving vinegrower. A lot more good growth takes place that way. John tells us that Jesus

said, “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5)

A healthy vineyard requires a knowledgeable vinegrower, a strong and stable vine, and many fruitful branches. You can’t have just one of those – you gotta have all three. And they all have to work together or there is no fine wine, no sustenance at all.

The author of the Gospel of John gives us guidance and helps us to understand the good news of Jesus Christ, not so much through the recounting of the historical presence of Jesus in the first century as through the use of powerful metaphors and images that stretch our minds, open our eyes and hopefully our hearts to the true meaning of “living in relation,” abiding with God and Jesus as our Christ.

To abide is to stand expectantly – somewhere, with some one and for some purpose. May we always do so in this place.

Let the people say, “Amen.” Let us prepare to share in the Lord’s Supper in a different way this day....

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<sup>[1]</sup>*Metaphors Dictionary*, p. vii.

<sup>[2]</sup>*Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, p. 1112-1113.

<sup>[3]</sup>*The Greek Dictionary of the New Testament*, p. 62, in *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*.