

SERMON- Easter 5 (B)
Charles R. Cowherd

Acts 8:26-40

1 John 4:7-21

St. Timothy's (Herndon)
April 28, 2024

John 15:1-8

Psalms 22:24-30

OPENING:

There is an area near where we live in Fox Mill that is known as the “Bamboo Forest”—and it indeed features imported bamboo trees that have run rampant. It has created, though, a magical place where the canopy is really dense making it cool and dry on ground level. You feel like you are in a different world and you can play hide and go-seek and the stalks can be used to create tree forts and as firewood that goes “POP” when it burns.

The children of Fox Mill LOVE the bamboo forest.

Needless to say, the landowners and the Homeowners Association HATE the bamboo forest.

GOSPEL:

Jesus said “I am the true VINE. You are my branches.”

The children of 1st century Palestine loved him.

Needless to say, the landowners and the HOAs, of the day, HATED him.

Still, Jesus and his word spread like kudzu.

You could not nail him down, or they tried once, but he got loose.

Jesus spread underground, undercover, and then out in the open for all to see.

His branches bore fruit through his disciples and through his church such that Jesus has been entangling himself and encroaching all around us ever since.¹

I AM _____

People back then were always asking Jesus:

“Who are you?”²

And, to be sure, Jesus never said:

“I am an invasive species that really should not be here but people thought it was good idea back in the day to plant but now causes environmental degradation but,

Instead he gave *other* confounding answers:

Last week, he said: “I am the Good Shepherd.”

“I am the gate” he says curiously in the same chapter

¹ Taylor, Barbara Brown. 1993. *The Preaching Life*. Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 106. (The sermon is heavily indebted to entirety of this one, which is entitled: “I Am Who I Am.”)

² John 8.25

More famously he says:

“I am the Light of the World”

“I am the Resurrection and the Life.”

“I am the way and the truth and life”

This summer, we will hear a whole chapter from John, breaking away AGAIN from our Marcan year, where Jesus says about himself:

“I am the Bread of Life” so many times that it will make you want to be gluten-free.

“Who are you?” they kept asking Jesus.

“I am all those things and more” he answered.

Because the protean, shape-shifting, morphing, Word of God can grow anywhere it seems.

METAPHORS

And those are just the metaphors

Let’s not even get into the names for Jesus

Son of God, Son of Man, Lord, Rabbi, Yeshua bar Joseph, God-man, Adonai, Prince of Peace, Wonderful Councilor.

There’s enough that then and now, it makes you want to say: “Pick one!”

Let’s maybe try to narrow it, nail it down.

(Again: we tried that once. Did not work. Buds sprouted forth, shoots emerged from the ground. The ivy grew across the lattice terrace.)

That’s good news, maybe not horticulturally-speaking for the common area of Fox Mill, but for us in this world.

G.K. Chesterton had this to say about parables, metaphors and allegories.

He said:

if the audience doesn’t understand the first one, give them a second,
if they don’t understand a second, give them a third one, and if they don’t
understand that one, you should oblige them of their intelligence and praise them
for that self-understanding: “Yes, that is quite correct, you don’t understand!”³

That’s the way Jesus rolled, so to speak. This avalanche of ideas and images and icons to describe who he was. He was not really interested in our ability to “get it”

³ Capon, Robert Farrar. 2002. *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 7.

but more interested in us having all these pictures and portraits of him our spiritual reservoir. Not so that we would understand, but so that we would believe.

“Don’t try to contain me.” Jesus said.

“Let me, instead, run wild in your imagination and your hearts and then see what fruits are borne.”

So his contemporary audience misunderstood him and how he revealed himself: When they heard the word: “Messiah”, they pictured a King on horseback, instead of a carpenter on a cross

When he talked about forgiveness, they started setting up rules for the limit.

When he talked about a kingdom and a heavenly banquet, they asked for him a seating chart.⁴

We do the same thing:

When we hear “God is love” (2nd lesson),

we think of an abstraction rather than an action

When we hear about an Ethiopian Eunuch (1st lesson),

we think about a diversity project that we might be able to implement upon some poor unsuspecting group that we perceive as marginalized.

When we hear about Vines and Branches (Gospel), we think about overgrowth and the need for pesticides. We cut straight to the pruning and the shearing. “Tell us about the Weeds” we say.

Now, admittedly, the metaphors sometimes break the Gospel writers.

That’s okay.

It certainly does with my “I am the Kudzu” metaphor and it does in our Gospel reading, all of the sudden the rubber band cannot hold and you are no longer talking about horticulture.

That’s okay, we don’t worship the metaphor, we worship the living God that is contained in and transcends and defies that metaphor.

SHIFT

“Who are you?”

The Pharisees asked Jesus and so do we.

What we want as a response is....

⁴ Capon, Robert Farrar. 2002. *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 7.

A social security number/ height and weight measurements/ a driver's license.

Ultimately, Jesus got frustrated and said "Why do you even ask?" and finally he said... he said what you could not say, after all the back and forth and the parables, and the I am this and the I am that.

He said "I am that I am."

(And they all moved over on the group W bench.⁵)

He spelled it out and that was too much. Call in the bulldozers and the DDT.

CONCLUSION

I realize I—if, this Spring and Summer, if you are battling kudzu and bamboo, this sermon might not be for you. But take this as your gardening advice.

This "I am the Vine" statement is the last one in John's Gospel and it is the only one that follows with a predicate.

"I am the vine"

"You are the branches" he says.

That means a few things.

First, we don't do the pruning, God does. God is the vinedresser, the landscaper, the sower and the reaper.

We, on the other hand, don't need to do much of anything.

If you think about, vines don't do anything. They hang out, they stay connected.

I think about the tough days of COVID... when I remember I did a lot of weeding... and the bar was low all we had to do was just get on ZOOM and say hello.

We don't need to do anything, just remain.

Abiding is not about what we do. It's who you are.

Abide in me as I abide in you.... If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

AMEN

⁵ Paraphrase from "The Alice's Restaurant Massacre" by Arlo Guthrie (1967)