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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA 2B14, P13
5 Easter (Year B) 11:00 a.m. Online, 2:00 p.m. First In-person Eucharist
Sunday 2 May 2021

Acts 8:26-40
Psalm 22:24-30
1 John 4:7-21
John 15:1-8

Jesus, Kenneth Rexroth, the Jackal and the Giraffe

"Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God" (1 Jn. 4).

We all know regret. It comes over us as we remember a quarrel with a person we love, or recall the pain we felt when a cherished relationship was broken. The poet Kenneth Rexroth (1905-1982) married Andrée Schafer a brilliant painter who suffered from epilepsy. In the spring of 1927 the two of them hitchhiked from Seattle down the West Coast sleeping under bridges along the way.¹

When they arrived in San Francisco the two camped on Mount Tamalpais and immediately knew that this is the place where they wanted to stay. Andrée painted. Kenneth wrote and participated in the 1934 waterfront strike. By the end of the 1930's they were quarreling, having affairs and then separated. Andrée's seizures grew more severe and she died in 1940. Elsa Gidlow a mutual friend scattered her ashes in Steep Ravine, on the way to Stinson Beach.

Kenneth Rexroth wrote several poems about Andrée and the watersheds of Mount Tamalpais. Let me read one:

"Now once more gray mottled buckeye branches / Explode their emerald stars, / And alders smoulder in a rosy smoke / Of innumerable buds. / I know that spring again is splendid / As ever, the hidden thrush / As sweetly tongued, the sun as vital - / But these are the forest trails that we walked together, / These paths, ten years together. / We thought the years would last forever, /"

"They are all gone now, the days / We thought would not come for us are here . / Bright trout poised in the current - / The racoon's track at the water's edge - / A bittern booming in the distance - / Your ashes scattered on this mountain - / Moving seaward on this stream."²

In a sense every marriage is an island distant to us. And we do not really know what happened to the Rexroths. But this feeling of beauty, loss and distance, and perhaps regret, lies close to the Gospel of John and the end of Jesus' life. My sermon today has three parts: the vine, the branches and the fruit.

1. The Vine. John dedicates a huge portion of his Gospel to the words Jesus shared on his last night with his friends. They feel afraid and he says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled" (Jn. 14). In their confusion they say, "Lord, show us the Father," and, "Lord, we do not know where you are going." And Jesus says to them, "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you."

We have so many metaphors today for a true picture that has been distorted. You can turn up the contrast on your television or computer so that you can barely recognize a familiar object.³ You can set the bass or treble on your stereo so that a song even in its stable rhythm becomes fundamentally changed. Using software you can alter the exposure of a photograph so that it fades completely away into all black or white.

Today's gospel can be distorted in this same way. If we turn the dial to an extreme we end up with a picture that washes out the truth of God's love and mercy. Jesus calls God the vinegrower and himself the true vine. He describes us as branches. In order to maximize the yield of grapes, God prunes all the branches. He cuts away some completely and burns them.

Many people read this with the exposure dial turned way down. For them this is primarily the dark story of an angry God standing on judgment day and violently condemning us for our sins. Others might have the contrast turned up way too high and see this as a self-justifying metaphor that illustrates God's condemnation of non-Christians, or people different from themselves. I disagree strongly with both of these views. I'm not claiming that we won't one day face the consequences of our actions, only that this story is more about how we are to live right now than about what happens after we die.

Let me point out two words particularly important for this passage's meaning. The first is the word *kathairo*. It's related to our word for catharsis. Psychoanalysts use this word for bringing up deeply repressed or ignored emotions. The philosopher Aristotle (384-322) uses it to describe how ancient Greek tragedies like *Oedipus Rex* purge and purify the audience's emotions.⁴ *Kathairo* means both to prune and to cleanse. When Jesus says, "Every branch that bears fruit [my Father] prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you" (Jn. 15), he uses the same word. My point is that this cleansing or purifying happens not just in the future but is something we are already undergoing.

The second word I want to draw your attention to is *alēthinē*. It means true as, when Jesus "I am the true vine." My friend Rick Fabian points out that it translates the Hebrew *'emet*, which means true and reliable, like a chair that we can go back to because it

bears our weight. Unlike Greek gods such as Athena who betrays Poseidon for Odysseus, we can depend on the Hebrew God. In the beginning of the Gospel John writes "grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (Jn. 1). We can rely on Jesus.⁵

2. The Branch. We are the branches and we are mistaken when we think we are separated from God. My friend Matt Boulton published a book called *God Against Religion*.⁶ It explores the assumptions that lie behind how we worship. Matt tells the story of Adam and Eve enjoying a perfect unity with God in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3). Things begin to go wrong when the snake talks to Eve as if God cannot hear them. By accepting this assumption, the first couple begin to experience the world as if they are cut off from God. They make decisions based on this false sense of separation. They actually and comically believe that they can hide from God.⁷

Matt goes on to discuss the sons of Adam and Eve. Cain and Abel both make sacrifices to God. When God "has regard for Abel and his offering" but not for Cain, Cain murders his brother (Gen. 4). For Matt this is the fundamental problem with worship and religion in general. When we do something for God in the hope or expectation that God will then do something for us, we accept this assumption that we are primarily separate from God and that our interests are different than God's.

Whether you go to church in order to become more prosperous, or you try to "be good" so that you can "get into heaven" – you are failing to receive what God is really giving to you. Through Christ, the true vine, God is giving you himself. In Jesus we are more completely ourselves, more human, more divine, more perfectly what God created us to be. At the heart of true worship is not a quid pro quo bargain with the author of creation but rather a response in gratitude to God's love.

3. The Fruit. What kind of fruit shows how you are connected to Christ? Paul answers this question in his letter to the Galatians. He writes, "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Gal. 5:22-3). Let me try another way to describe what that fruit is like.

Years ago I participated in a course on nonviolent communication.⁸ Each person has different interests which sometimes conflict. These tensions can be resolved in one of two ways: First, through the application of force by using the different kinds of power that we have available to us (ranging from physical violence, intimidation and financial power to whining or passive-aggressive foot-dragging). However, we can also solve problems cooperatively through understanding our own and other's needs, and then creatively finding win/win solutions.

Our teacher talked about two ways of speaking and listening that all of us use. On the one hand we have within us a jackal which is constantly labeling, evaluating, judging and criticizing others and even our self. The jackal sees the world in narrow terms as a zero sum game in which a win for the other person is a loss for us. It uses the language of good and bad, reward and punishment, to lash out in an effort to get its own way.

This is in contrast to the giraffe. The giraffe sees the big picture. The giraffe tries to understand the larger context and can imagine what the world looks like to the other person. Giraffes eat thorns. They take in sharply spoken words in a detached way and make something positive out of them.

Giraffes have the biggest hearts. When in doubt about what to do, try to empathize with the other person. Empathize even with that critical voice inside you. Ninety percent of communication is nonverbal and in your face the other person may see the contents of your heart. Finally, giraffes stick their necks out. They take risks for the sake of love.

Instead of presuming to know everything or coming to a quick conclusion, they give "the gift of the question." They make guesses about the other person's feelings or experience and then ask if these are correct. They know that feelings are signs of met and unmet needs, and graciously articulate their own needs and those of the other person. This is the way life in Christ brings forth the fruit of the spirit. This is what love really looks like.

About a beautiful Northern California spring day, Kenneth Rexroth writes, "We thought the years would last forever, / They are all gone now, the days / We thought would not come for us are here." The days are here. So how do we live in a way that bears fruit and not regret? We realize that Jesus is true, faithful and reliable. Jesus will not leave us orphaned. He is organically connected to us giving us life. In us this becomes the power to overcome our jackal selves, to be giraffes vulnerable in our love and bearing the fruit of peace, patience and kindness.

¹ Tom Killion, "Poetic Histories. The Sleeping Lady: Invention and Appropriation," *Tamalpais Walking: Poetry, History, and Prints* (Berkeley, California: Heydey Press, 2009) 94ff.

² Rexroth wrote this poem at about the age of 36. Kenneth Rexroth, "Andrée Rexroth," *The Complete Poems of Kenneth Rexroth* (Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2003) 220.

³ This television knob image comes from Benjamin Anthony, "Neither Heaven Nor Hell," in Day One for 10 May 2009. http://day1.org/1250-neither_heaven_nor_hell

⁴ Aristotle, *Poetics* (335 BC).

⁵ Conversation with Rick Fabian 30 April 2021.

⁶ Matthew Myer Boulton, *God Against Religion: Rethinking Christian Theology Through Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008).

⁷ Matt believes that all worship originates out of this sense of distance from God.

⁸ This nonviolent communications (NVC) course was based on Marshall Rosenberg's method and was presented by Ursula Duncan at Christ Episcopal Church in Los Altos, California on 29 April 2009.