

Bowling Together
Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 3, 2015
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Text: John 15
I John 4

The title of this sermon – *Bowling Together* – serves 2 purposes. First of all it is a blatant plug for the Youth Group fundraiser this evening, to which Pastor Jill will also be alerting you during Life of Hope – come to the BAM center this evening at 6pm and there will be fun for all, bowling together, and raising funds for our youth summer service trip to Greenpoint RCA in Brooklyn. The second purpose of the sermon title is that it refers back to the first sermon I ever preached at Hope Church, 16 years ago now when I preached here as a candidate to be called to serve here. I began that sermon with a reference to a study on social trends, an article titled “Bowling Alone” – it was a study of a trend toward people being less involved in established groups and organizations and instead moving toward more individual and isolated patterns in activities. The study had received quite a bit of media attention and discussion, and I was quite pleased that I could share this interesting study with Hope Church – make a good first impression. The sermon seemed to go OK – but afterwards, I will always remember Dr. David Myers (Hope College social psychologist and member of Hope Church) informing me that this ‘Bowling Alone’ study was one of the most often used illustrations he had ever heard, having been cited in all sorts of sermons and lectures and speeches– and as far as David was concerned, the whole ‘Bowling Alone’ bit was getting a bit overdone. Well – so much for first impressions – but, apparently the sermon did minimal harm, as I was called to Hope Church. Although, in looking back at the sermon this week too, I’d also like to say that it was way too long – sorry about that! So, I’ve tried to make progress, both in sermon length and sermon material – in fact a complete 180 from Bowling Alone to Bowling Together.

Not that there is a new research study about Bowling Together, but it’s simply a quirky way to point toward what it seems to me is being brought up in the scripture for this 5th Sunday of

Eastertide: themes of connection and community – how are we connected or not?, to God and to one another? – what does it mean to be a part of something, or someone, or not?

Jesus uses a much more eloquent and engaging image than bowling to bring us into those questions: ‘I am the true vine’ – Jesus says. Perhaps a bit less familiar image for us than it was for people of that time – in that farming culture vineyards were close at hand; less so for us here, but not unfamiliar to us. As Jesus often does, he draws this image of vineyard and vine from nature and everyday life to engage his listeners with faith and faithfulness. ‘I am the true vine’ – Jesus says; ‘I am the true vine and my Father is the vinegrower’; ‘I am the true vine and you are the branches’; ‘I am the true vine and you will bear much fruit’; and even, ‘I am the true vine and whatever you wish it will be done for you!’ It is a lovely and inviting image – connection and health, abiding and abundance – a creative and bountiful image of faith in God.

But all is not so lovely and inviting here. I was thinking that part of what I appreciated about our Seminary Intern Julia Brown’s sermon last Sunday on Psalm 23, was how she acknowledged the comforting content and reputation of Psalm 23, which is all good – but also pointed out the unsettling images present: shadows and valleys, death and enemies, as part of what needs to be explored in the Psalm. And that is much the same case in what Jesus says here in John 15. ‘I am the true vine...the vinegrower removes fruitless branches; and prunes the fruitful ones’ ‘I am the true vine...those not abiding in me are cast away and wither; those branches are gathered together and burned’. This lovely vine image is also a sobering one: pruning and removing, withering and burning – threatening and frightening images that Jesus uses. This vineyard is run with a very clear standard for its operations: fruitful? then you’re fine; fruitless? into the fire. “I am the true vine” – beautiful and sobering.

I’m not so sure how much those sobering aspects of this image really get explored – I wonder if it’s more often we gloss over such aspects of the image. But even so, it does seem to me that the combination of this inviting and sobering image does get reflected in how connection to the church is often portrayed, at least in some sort of standard or stereotypical way. Because if you think about being connected to the church – there is some sort of baseline understanding that what

that means is that you are connected with God; and if you go a bit further perhaps it suggests that in some way too that God listens to you and maybe even that God is on your side. That's good for us in the church, this connection; and, if you're not connected here, well, then you wither and burn. Now you may object to this characterization – you may say you don't believe this, that what we are about in the church is saying be connected here...or else! - or maybe you do; but what I'm saying is that I think there is this accumulated characterization of church that if you connect here, you're in! – if you don't, you're out. And whether it's said or not, it can become the default identity of church: you have to be in here to be in with God; and I think it's the impression of plenty of people outside the church. Interesting thing though, as I look back at the text, it does not say: 'the Church is the vine' – Jesus said: 'I am the true vine'. Hmm...makes you wonder what connection matters...

Alright – well let's let that percolate for a bit and turn to another image for connection, this one from 1st John. And here's the image: 'God is Love' – now maybe that sounds to you more like an attribute or description or even identity in speaking of God, and it is those things too. But I'd like us to think of it as an image too in the sense of all the connections, all the implications that flow out of this statement: 'God is Love' – abundant connections sprout from there, almost vine-like... vine-like in 1st John with all the ways these ideas weave around and back onto each other in good Johannine style – did you see all the connections you find if you start with "God is Love"? - love makes one a child of God; love gives knowledge of God; love of God means one also loves others; love is God's presence abiding in those who love, and those who love abiding in God; fullness of love means the absence of fear; it is impossible for love of God and hatred of others to coexist. You start with God is love, and the connections to God and to others are intricately intertwined.

But let me just stop for a moment, and see if I've lost you. Because it's my suspicion about us – about you and me – that hearing about love, about God is love, as much as we all may be in favor of that, can make for a bit of an "eyes glaze over" kind of spiritual reaction. Love is good, but perhaps it's become a bit too familiar with us; or maybe too domesticated for us. A couple

weeks ago I was able to be a part of the Bible Study for Adult Ed that Curtis Gruenler is leading in Eastertide – and part of what we were discussing is how “love” is such an odd word in the English language. Odd in that I use the same word for ‘I love potato chips’ and ‘I love my wife’ – I appreciate both things, but it’s different! We use the same word for ‘I love my car’ and ‘I love God’ – again, I don’t want to dis your car, but love for God is a different thing! The Greek language, however, uses different words for love: friendly love, romantic love, and then this love that IS God – that word for love is AGAPE. 1st John 4 says God is AGAPE – which means a love that gives fully of oneself – it is a self-giving love for the good of another. AGAPE is the word for love that is used throughout this passage – and with that in mind I’d like us to try to un-glaze our eyes in hearing about love – because I think it is remarkable to take in, when AGAPE is at the heart of this image of love. God is love, means that God is constantly giving God’s self to this world; the revelation of Christ is that God is continually present in giving life to this world. And it is that reality of God as love which gives meaning to all those connections that we saw springing from that image of love – of God’s love for us and ours for God and our love for others: our identity is found in AGAPE – in seeing our lives as purposed for the good of others – of all others. This passage never says who God loves – just God IS love; this passage never says who we should not love – only to love others as God loves us. AGAPE from God is inextricable from AGAPE with others.

Alright – well, remember that vine passage? – that vine image? – beautiful and scary – comforting and harsh? Well it seems to me that understanding that passage becomes very clear after we hear 1st John – what Jesus’ words jump out to us as is a parable of the presence of AGAPE or not in life: the self-giving love of God creates life that brings one beyond fear and into AGAPE with others; BUT life without such love is a scary thing – it is indeed life that withers and burns, it is life indeed that is fruitless and futile. The word that truly defines our connections in life is: ‘God is Love’ - and Jesus as the True Vine makes no mistake about the life and death consequences that are at stake as to how AGAPE is present or not in our lives and world. That is why Jesus says ‘I am the TRUE vine’ – because there are also sorts of ways to be connected in this

world...bowling...or religion, or race, or country, or class, or gender, or education or identity or ability...or church...all sorts of vines; but there is only one vine, one connection that does not inevitably end in division: AGAPE – to see God and self and others inextricably linked in the fullness of life for all – that is the vine that abides and connects and abounds.

Some of our 9th graders have been preparing to make profession of faith, which we will be celebrating with them soon in May – and as they have written statements of faith for that, there was an idea expressed that has stuck with me. One of the credos said something like: ‘I think sometimes people have the idea that my faith means that I think I’m better than they are or that they have to join my religion – but I believe faith is touching others with the love of God – that is what will inspire people.’ I think that sounds like AGAPE. We are here, to be bearers of God’s love there; we abide in worship here, because we know God’s love abides in us everywhere we go; we are connected here, because we need to be renewed in the love of God that connects us to all God’s children and all creation. Bowling together this evening won’t accomplish all of that – but it will help send our youth to Brooklyn, and that’s something, because that’s AGAPE. Thanks be to God, for God is Love. Amen.