

Fifth Sunday after Easter
John 15:1-8, Psalm 22, 1 John 4:7-21
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Writer Wendell Berry wrote that he believes the Bible is essentially an outdoor book. By that he meant it was best read outdoors because that is where we see the truest miracles and wonders of life. He believes turning water into wine was a small miracle compared to “the greater and still continuing miracle by which water (with soil and sunlight) is turned into grapes.”

Today we hear Jesus refer to himself as the true grape vine, while his Father is the vine grower, and we are the branches on which the grapes grow.

I did read the Bible some outdoors in Hawai'i as I prepared two sermons – one in John's hammock on his deck or lanai, as they call them in Kauai. You may remember that I preached and celebrated communion for two Sundays at Christ Memorial Church in Kilauea while their regular priest was on vacation in Seattle, Washington. On the third Sunday, we attended the church and met the priest, Robin Taylor. By then we felt very connected to and a part of that small congregation.

A full church was 40-50 people, and each Sunday there were many visitors in the congregation, mostly from California. They started the service with announcements and then asked visitors to please stand and tell everyone who they were and where they were from.

When I wasn't in church or preparing for Sunday services, I was essentially outdoors. Juanita and I stayed in a one-room efficiency, which the landlord referred to as the “bungalow in the jungalow.” It had many screened openings and little glass so light and the outdoor sounds were prevalent. But I didn't want to stay in except to sleep. Kauai, with its year-round warm weather, tropical climate, lush vegetation and abundant beaches, entices one beyond enclosures and into the natural beauty of creation, Wendell Berry's truest miracles and wonders of life.

We watched the sunrise every morning from the beach within a few minutes walking distance from our house. We snorkeled, swam, hiked along the coast or to cascading waterfalls, visited botanical gardens and toured a Hindu Temple and monastery. I was struck by how similar the goals of the oldest religion, Hinduism, and Christianity are regarding individual transformation and selfless service.

We participated in a Japanese tea ceremony in the Hall of Compassion and then walked a vertical labyrinth path on a hillside past 88 small Buddhist shrines and prolific orchids. We saw the island's spectacular Waimea Canyon, Hawaii's version of the mainland's Grand Canyon. We

spent two days and one night in Honolulu on the neighboring island of Oahu, where we took a sunset sail, surfed at Waikiki Beach and visited Pearl Harbor – hallowed ground. We kayaked and paddle boarded on a serene river and one night listened to a local ukulele player that Eric Clapton would have envied.

I surfed for a little while at least every other day on a few protected beaches. Many of the beaches were fraught with high surf, turbulent white water and dangerous currents. On one occasion, at a mostly deserted beach, son John and I made the mistake of going in. Within minutes we were swept down the beach and out of sight of Juanita. I was overtaken with exhaustion and had difficulty breathing because the waves continuously washed over me. I actually wondered if I would survive. Fortunately, John had suggested we wear our fins, and he was able to keep a cool head and get us both back to the beach.

A couple of days later we saved a man at another beach who couldn't get back to the shore after he had weakened himself swimming against a rip tide. On that occasion, we had John's kayak, or that man's last day in Kauai might have been his last on earth.

Kauai is a paradise, but also one of the drowning capitals of the world. I can't tell you how scared I was and so very grateful not to have been one of its victims.

Hawaii doesn't have the climate for vineyards and grape growing, but they do grow a lot of coffee, another of the essential nectars. We visited the Kauai Coffee Plantation (four million trees on 3,100 acres) and learned about the many stages of coffee growing, harvesting, shelling, and finally roasting. Like grape vines, we were told that for the trees to bear good fruit, they had to be severely pruned every six or seven years. Eight-to-ten foot trees were cut back to two or three feet.

The difficult truth in today's reading about vine growers, vines and branches is that even the productive branches need to be pruned to be even more productive. My brush with death may have been such a pruning of sorts to remind me of my mortality, human frailty and the limitations of increasing age. The good news is that we are vitally connected to the vine. Vine and branches abide in one another. Jesus abides in us and we abide in Jesus.

We can stay somewhat connected to the divine source through nature, but nature can be unforgiving as I almost found out in the ocean at Polihale Beach. The tether in Kauai that was most secure for me was through my son John but perhaps even more through the little Christ Memorial Episcopal Church. The liturgy was familiar and the music from the hymnal, even though it was played exclusively by fine guitarists. (There wasn't room for an organ or piano.) We did sing the doxology in Hawaiian, but that was appropriate in that particular setting.

Each Sunday it should be the sacrament of inclusion by us, the holy people, and the communion bread and wine that most intimately connects us and holds us close to the divine Source of All. The botanical name for grape is *vitis*, which is related to the word *vita* or life. Our truest and essential life comes from this life – the body of Christ, made tangible and ingestible through actual bread and wine.

Perhaps the metaphor John uses of the grape vine breaks down because the vine cannot exist without the branches either. We know today that without the branches and leaves, photosynthesis won't produce necessary fuel, and the plant can't survive.

The world and the church certainly need us branches to produce fruit. Each of us in our own unique way, with our particular gifts, is an essential part of the whole. We should never think we are replaceable, dispensable or ineffectual. I know you've heard the saying, "God doesn't make no junk." However, we must do our part to stay connected to the vine and roots. I conclude this morning with a few suggestions:

- Take a few moments each morning to ask God to guide, direct and protect us.
- Try to get to worship with other Christians somewhere, sometime every week if possible.
- Pray for someone we dislike to be abundantly blessed by God.
- Tell at least one person every day that we love them.
- Give more time and money away than we think we can afford.
- Say "No" to something we don't like doing and "Yes" to something we do like doing.
- Spend a few moments at the end of each day to count our blessings and account for and learn from our mistakes.
- And don't go swimming in Kauai or anywhere unless plenty of other people are already in the water. AMEN.