

Differences to Love
John 15:9-17, Acts 10:44-48
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I

There is a certain wild section of our back yard that is finally starting to look pretty nice after three years of work. We've planted a couple of small trees and a great collection of perennials that love the summer sun. It's not meant to be a place in the yard that is highly manicured. We actually let the chickens forage back there because it helps to tame the jungle. What we could really use, though, is a goat to mow back all those creeping vines. The folks who live next to us really love the wisteria - so, after clearcutting the privacy thicket between our houses that they have enjoyed for more than thirty years, as a gesture of neighborly magnanimity, I allowed one wisteria vine to remain on the fence between our houses. Of course now, just three years later - that vine has romped from one end of the property to the other and burst with little green leaves in every direction like a mop-headed middle schooler needing a haircut. I hardly dare to cut into it again though, because my savage attack on these vines last time resulted in a horrible case of poison ivy. Indeed, much more than wisteria lives back there - the ivy vines, invasive honeysuckle, and who knows what else. I claw the shooting roots out of the earth. I hack vagrant tendrils down from the posts. But the growth is so relentless I've all but given up the fight. "You did not choose me," Jesus said, "but I chose you."

II

Jesus says he is the vine and we are the branches as if our connection to him is only natural, as if our belonging is easy and our place in the family is undoubted and uncontested. Read in the Gospel of John: as wisteria grows in my backyard so we are growing on the vine of Christ. Left unsaid is the great effort God exerts to remain faithful to this covenant with us on the many occasions in Israel's history when God's people have not been responsible to the covenant. Left unremarked upon is the grief and pain Jesus will experience on his way to the cross or the rejection he will suffer by Peter, Judas, and others. Left without comment is how challenging it sometimes is and how bad it sometimes feels to stay connected to this vine. But if there is any sentimentality in this metaphor, Jesus turns in the next passage to a disarming reality check - "you did not choose me, but I chose you" - he says, in confession and in honesty.

The truth is belonging in any covenant is hard work - think about the choices we make every day to stick with marriage, or with a long friendship, or to show up to the communities where we belong. Love in this manner is not automatic, but intentional; it's not passive, but volitional; it's not effortless but purposeful. When Jesus says you did not choose me but I chose you, he means that when our commitment was weak his was strong. Meaning that when our faithfulness wavered the love of Christ was still there. Meaning that when we held doubts that we belonged, the love of God was sure - reaching out to us and making a place at Christ's table. "This is my commandment," Jesus says - and there's the clue: laws aren't written for the fun of it; laws are written for a reason. "Love one another as I have loved you." God has written the law because our condition is to fall short of this perfect love. If love was all natural, why would God have made it a law? If love was all easy, why would God ask for our obedience?

III

There are other ways we could quibble with the metaphor of vine and branches. It makes you wonder if there is really only one vine - and what about others on other vines bearing fruit of a very different kind and flavor?

Incidentally, that is the major work of the early church - the people who grew on the vine of Judaism notice other vines creeping along their fence line. They begin to meet Italians, Greeks and Ethiopians who know nothing of their traditions but are called to follow Jesus. And the question is whether these people who are so different can actually belong to the old covenant where we've never met these differences before. Sameness is easy to love - but difference, that's where our commitment is tested.

So we come to Peter's great revelation - "I truly understand that God shows no partiality," he proclaims. Whereupon, it is written, the Holy Spirit moved among a great crowd of people from different communities and with different identities. And the Apostles are faced with a dilemma - they had previously baptized only people of Jewish origin and yet the Holy Spirit had clearly been given to the Gentiles. We have no authority to exclude those whom God has included, reasons Peter, concluding that any Gentiles present must be baptized, too. "How could we not use the water of baptism on these people who have the Holy Spirit!" he exclaims. The story illustrates what Jesus had said - people from different traditions adopted into the love of God. Lots of differences can flourish in this covenant. Many different communities are in the church of Jesus Christ. Lots of different vines can grow on this fence.

Speaking of love, the Christian tradition teaches that any choice we have is largely an illusion. This is the Christian paradox of love: It comes naturally, as easy as plants growing in the sun; it comes painstakingly, our labored effort to comply with God's commandment. Either way you think of it, love doesn't give us much choice. Either it seduces us by desire, or it compels us by responsibility. Love is God's gift and love is God's law. Seeking love across our differences is the basis of life in Christian community. It is a blessing and a challenge. It is a gift and a summons. It's commandment and a grace. "You did not choose me but I chose you."

It has been my experience that at any given moment one or another among us may be stronger in our choosing. When the commitment of one is weak, we're sustained by the enduring commitment of another, or of others. For at some time or another, we all find ourselves in the predicament of Jesus here. That is - the love of choosing in spite of not being chosen. And in the same way we all experience the grace that Jesus comes to know - that is, the grace of being chosen even when we aren't choosing.

This spring I laid down my sword. I'm not taking the machete to the wisteria anymore. I'm letting it grow, but I'm going to try to teach it a few lessons about neighborliness. On that fence we've been planting jasmine, trumpet vine, and clematis. John's gospel suggests they may all flourish naturally. Luke's history makes me think some negotiating may be in order. But this I believe is a truth we come to know in Christian community: there is room on this fence for many differences to love.