

“What Earth Asks of Us”

April 28, 2024

Based on John 15:1-4. Vine, branches, fruit.

Also based on “What is the earth asking of us?” by Robin Wall Kimmerer

It seems providential, if you believe in such things, that a Presbyterian Pastor would move into a home in upstate New York with a grape vine winding its way along the columns of the front porch.

That grape vine was massive. Way overgrown, but emphatically biblical. One great big vine of Life with branch after branch after branch producing the sourest grapes you might ever imagine, but still beautiful and mystical and magical.

From mid-June through mid-September, this grapevine of grace formed a cool canopy beneath the heat of the sun: a haven for birds and butterflies and caterpillars ... and humans. The swinging bench underneath formed the perfect place for meditation or prayer or sermon prep ... or a really good nap.

Each year as the grapes became ripe, I invited the children of the church over for a party: to gobble up the grapes to their hearts' content, and then turn the leftovers into grape juice for communion. Peals of delight emerged from young mouths as they competed with one another over who gleaned the largest harvest or the largest single grape or even the smallest single grape. Tedious work of pulling each grape from the vine after washing it filled with light-hearted banter and the occasional shriek from encountering a creepy crawly critter embedded in between. Then came the boiling and the mashing and the straining and the cooling and the canning. All followed by a nice long swig of true communion and a job well done. The lifeblood of the risen Christ flowing through the lifeblood of the grape into our collective mouth, insisting we have always been and forever will be *one* in a Garden of Grace.

Once my husband the gardener arrived on the scene, before he became my husband, he shook his head in wonder and got to work, pruning some branches and just plain lopping off others, and by the time we left, that grapevine was magic. It had become a part of us as we had become a part of it. It was as hard to say goodbye to that grapevine as it was to say goodbye to our 98 year old grandmotherly neighbor, because that grapevine was even more than a neighbor: it was family; it was *kin*.

Kin is the name indigenous botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer wants us to give to the family of plants that give humans life on this earth we call our home. Plants are *beings*, Robin Wall Kimmerer insists, including the grapevine. Plants share a mutual breath with us, as their exhale becomes our inhale and our exhale becomes theirs. We abide in them, and they abide in us, literally, with every breath we take. Which means by rights our every inhale should be accompanied with a grateful *thank you* to the grapevine, and our every exhale with a humble *you're welcome*.

[Try it with me: *thank you - you're welcome; thank you - you're welcome*]

The grapevine needs us, and we need it, literally, to breathe. There is, indeed, a mystical kinship between humans and our plant family, profoundly realized in our breath.

It turns out, this mystical kinship of all creation forms the foundation of John's entire Gospel. *All things came into being through the Word*, the first chapter tells us. *What has come into being through the Word was LIFE!* John's Prologue continues. All of it bearing the divine imprint, all of it intimately connected to itself, all of it in mystical kinship with the Creator embedded within it.

In the 15th Chapter of John's Gospel, as Jesus comes to the end of his own unique individual life, he describes that life as one great vine in the ever growing Garden of God's Grace. He goes on to describe you and me as branches of that vine, pruned and cultivated and nurtured to bear great fruit. Jesus insists that all of the pruning and cultivating and nurturing, all of the reciprocal breathing inherent in being human has ultimately been about teaching us over and over again how to love one another - and all of creation - as we have been loved.

It is too easy to forget we are loved, simply by being creation. It is too easy to forget that we need each other, when our individual branches of divine incarnation twist and turn and overlap and grate against one another. But we do. As Robin Wall Kimmerer reminds us, *our lives are completely contingent on the gifts of others*.

Our first responsibility, then, as people, Robin Wall Kimmerer says, is GRATITUDE for the gift. Just simply say thank you, which is what worship is supposed to be about. One big Alleluia to God at least one day a week for the gift of this earth, with its plants and animals inhaling and exhaling to keep one another alive. The medieval mystic, Meister Eckhart says the same: if the only prayer we ever say is *thank you*, that will suffice. We can do it with every inhale.

From Gratitude, then, will naturally follow RESPECT. As Robin Wall Kimmerer says so emphatically, with respect we realize that *human exceptionalism has to go*. With respect we acknowledge we are not the only beings on this planet; far from it. With respect we humbly admit that life on this good earth flourished for millennia without us, and it can do so again. The respect that flows from gratitude inevitably leads us to know our place within this earth as a *community of beings*, including the grape vine, including the branch, including the grape itself, not just as a metaphor for Christian community but as a *plant-being partner* within that community. We can do it with every exhale.

From Gratitude and Respect, Robin Wall Kimmerer says, will naturally follow RESTORATION. Amending the harm that we who are human have done to our kin. Cleaning up rivers in Appalachia and Flint, Michigan and even here in our own Potomac. Planting native trees and swapping seeds and buying local. Lobbying Congress and boycotting polluters and divesting from fossil fuels. Living in the world we are living in, while imagining a different one. Embodying our aspirational values. Choosing joy over despair.

From Gratitude, Respect and Restoration, will naturally follow RECIPROCITY: learning to live together with our plant family within our shared homeland, with this land as a place of moral responsibility. Learning to give

as we receive, learning to love as we have been loved, treating the land as a gift, rather than property, building up our sense of belonging to this land, rather than building up a pile of belongings that weigh upon the land. With a commitment to reciprocity, Robin Wall Kimmerer says, *we become like the berries. We know our gifts and how to give them; this is what it means to be educated.*

From Gratitude, Respect, Restoration and Reciprocity, will naturally flow CEREMONY. Ritualized practices that embed within our communal psyche a *kin*-centric worldview with our plant and animal family. Like the children blessing plants and animals and a feature of the earth in our worship. Like the insistence that our animal family worship with us, including Striped Skunk and Black Bear and Wood Frog and Lake Trout and Axolotl. Like gathering the waters essential for Baptism from our local lakes and rivers and streams, which will then lead us to ensure those lakes and rivers and streams remain clean enough for the water to splash the forehead of an infant.

From Gratitude, Respect, Restoration, Reciprocity and Ceremony will naturally flow an ongoing practice of ATTENTION. Just notice. Just notice. Notice the grapevine behind the cup of communion. Notice the wheat behind the bread at the table. Notice the Town Run behind the pitcher at the baptismal font. Notice the pine tree behind the paper of The Book. *I don't know exactly what a prayer is*, Mary Oliver reminds us. *I do know how to pay attention.*

Gratitude - Respect - Restoration - Reciprocity - Ceremony - Attention - all of which leads us back again to Gratitude. This is what Earth asks of us, Robin Wall Kimmerer says. This is what Jesus asks of us, the Gospel of John says. To embody the aspirational values of mutual abiding, connection, relatedness, accountability, with one another *and* the rest of creation. To live as “The Great Green We,” so pruned and cultivated and nurtured that we who are human become a party for the children of the grapevine, as much as the grapevine in front of my house in upstate New York became a party for the children of that church.

On the one hand, it sounds easy. Just simply breathe and be who we are created to be. On the other hand, it requires an entire re-framing of body, mind, and spirit in a culture and economy based on individualism and competitiveness. The good news for us is that God is working overtime through all time to prune us and cultivate us and nurture us into fruit-bearing branches in a Garden of Grace that is already our kin, so that our joy may be complete and we may learn to love one another as the Creator of that Garden has loved us.