Sunday, May 18, 2003
I AM
I John 4:7-8, 15:1-5

It has been said that "most religious language and religious stories are metaphorical." Once you begin to understand and accept this, the teachings and stories in the Bible begin to make a lot more sense. Many of the stories in the Bible, such as the story of Jonah, are meant to be metaphors, and the Bible continually uses metaphors to talk about God. Jesus constantly used metaphors to describe God and himself. His many parables made good use of metaphors.

Another example of the use of metaphors is found in that wonderful story in the book of Exodus, where Moses has an experience of the Holy. He hears what he interprets as the voice of God coming from a bush that seems to be burning. The message is that he has been called to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt and out of bondage. Moses is reluctant to accept the assignment and comes up with all kinds of excuses. In order to be sure it is God who is asking him to take on this job, Moses wants to know God's name. Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' they are going to ask, 'What is his name?' What shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." You shall say to the Israelites, "I AM has sent me to you."

Jesus knew this story of Moses, and so did many of the people who heard his teachings. Therefore, some of those who heard him were probably surprised with his use of the words "I AM" as an introduction to many of the metaphors describing who he was. These were not just any words. They were sacred words, divine words, holy words.

"I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world. I am the door. I am the good shepherd. I am the resurrection and the life. I am the way, the truth, and the life. I am the vine, you are the branches." With his use of the "I AM," Jesus was also saying, in effect, "I am the love of God in a human being. This love of God is the bread of life. This love of God is the light of the world. This love of God is the vine, and you are the branches."

These "I AM" statements were very precious to the followers of Jesus after the resurrection when he was no longer physically with them. They helped them define and remember their relationship to him and, through him, to the great "I AM," and equally important, their connection to each other. "I am the vine, you are the branches." He was saying, "I am your connection to God, and through me, you are all connected to each other. Never forget that."

But it is frequently forgotten. "I am the vine and you are the branches." This image challenges you to rethink your understanding of spirituality. The temptation is to approach the whole matter of spirituality on an individual basis only. People talk about their own private, personal spiritual journey. Your individual spiritual journey is important, but you need to remember it is not possible to be connected to God without being connected to each other.

The Bible tells us in another place, "Anyone who says he or she loves God and hates another human being is a liar." Also, in the first part of the scripture reading for today from the first letter of John are these memorable words: "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love."

“I am the vine, you are the branches.” Through the love of God, we are all connected to each other. It’s also true that in today’s world, more than ever, we are connected to each other in many additional ways. The electronic connections are everywhere — transistor radios, cell phones, the internet, email, fax machines, television. In Egypt, in a small hut made of mud bricks with no running water or indoor plumbing and only a dirt floor, I saw a television tuned to CNN World News. I saw the same in rural Russia in a remote village. In the same village, it seemed as if everyone had a transistor radio and a cell phone.

Because the world is increasing dramatically in population, there are more people everywhere. You can meet more different people in a single day than our ancestors met in a lifetime. I watch my grandchildren on the internet, and they can be talking on the instant message system with ten different people at one time while they are writing a paper on the same computer.

We are connected electronically in so many ways that we are developing systems to keep people from being connected. You’ve all had the experience of attempting to get through by telephone to “customer service,” and you get a recorded message with a menu of six different options. The menu and its options, and then being put on “hold” for five minutes or longer, become a barrier to being connected. Sometimes when I’m asked by the recorded message if I want a person’s “voice mail,” I say “no, I want to talk to them in person” and hang up. Sometimes when I get a memo or note from someone that has the heading, “From the desk of,” I reply by writing, “Dear Desk.”

Because of the many ways in which human beings are electronically connected and live in larger and larger urban areas, it has become fashionable today to call the earth a “global village.” But that’s an oxymoron. A village, in its original meaning, was a manageable place with common ideals, linked by an agreed-upon sense of order; a place where you could live without having to lock your doors at night or while you were away on vacation. But such is not the case with the increasingly large population centers. We are physically connected by living in close proximity to each other and connected electronically, but disconnected because of different values, fear of each other, religions that emphasize exclusion and hate rather than inclusion and love, lack of trust, envy, and constant mobility.

The words of Jesus, “I am the vine, you are the branches,” need to be heard again — and not in an exclusive way, but inclusive. The only way we human beings in the world can stay meaningfully connected, in the midst of all the forces that work to keep us disconnected, is to be bound together by what unites us.

What the Christian faith tells us is that what unites us more than anything else is the fact that we are all branches of one vine — human beings created by God in God’s image. We are different branches, but we are all connected to this same vine. Beneath our skins and outward physical differences, we are made of the same stuff. When a pathologist does an autopsy on a human being who has died and gets inside the body, she knows that inside, all of us are constructed in the same way.

People like Emerson used different expressions but were saying the same thing. What Emerson called the “over-soul” reminds us that we are joined not only by our habits and urges and our fears but also by our dreams, and that best part of us senses an identity and connection that is larger than we are. It’s what all religions call the “Holy,” or the “Sacred,” or the “I AM,” or “Allah,” or “God.”

In a book published several years ago, called The Global Soul, Pico Iyer writes: “Look up wherever you are, and you can see what we have in common; look down, or inside, and you can see something universal. It is only when you look around you that you note divisions.” In other words, when you look around you, you see various branches and sometimes forget all the branches are connected to one vine, or one source — God. You are tempted to forget that you are branches connected to one vine, or you can falsely assume you are the only branch, or at least the only branch that counts.

Note especially, the word is “branches” plural, not “branch” singular. There are many branches on God’s vine. All the branches are meant to be connected to the love of God. All humanity is meant to be connected to this love of God. There is diversity in the branches. They are not all the same size. Some produce more fruit than others. Only when each branch is doing its respective part can the vine produce to its full potential.

Former U.S. Senator Bill Bradley wrote a book about his career as a professional basketball player. Its title is: Life on the Run. In it, he describes what he calls the “magic nights.” These were the times when the plays were run, the picks were set, and the shots were made. These were the games when each player instinctively moved to exactly the right spot and did exactly the right thing. These were the “magic nights” when the players seemed to be interconnected and interdependent, when each player utilized his particular talents, when teamwork took priority over individual accomplishment. Then individual team members accomplished something by working together that they could never have accomplished by not working smoothly together as a unit.

In the same way, like branches that stay connected to the vine, and like players on the team who work in harmony together because they are connected by a common purpose, church members need each other to build a beloved community so that we can increase among people the love of God and neighbor. The biggest heresy in much popular religion is the notion that religion is a private affair, a secret contract between the believer and God, or that your personal relationship to God is the most important fact.

Jesus meant for his followers to be part of a loving community and to be continually expanding that loving community. It was no accident that Jesus called a group of disciples, not isolated individuals. He also said, “Wherever two or three or more are gathered together, there am I also.” God’s loving Spirit is most deeply present when people are working together toward a positive common goal. To become a follower of the way of Jesus is not some sort of “home correspondence course” in self-improvement. The church is to be a community of people growing and ministering to each other and always reaching out to others. It is meant to be inclusive rather than exclusive.

On yet another level, the challenge for all religions in the future is to find ways of working together in harmony for the good of all. It’s a huge challenge because even in the Christian faith, the various denominations have trouble working together and sometimes have trouble even praying together, or welcoming each other at the Lord’s Table.

“I am the vine; you are the branches.” How do you stay connected to this vine? How do you maintain your relationship with the God who is love? According to Jesus, you stay connected to God by keeping your connections to one another healthy. That’s what the writer of the first letter of John was saying. “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.” He went on to say, “It is when you love

one another that God lives in you and God's love is perfected in you." Did you hear that? When you love others, it is then that you stay connected to the source of all love — God.

Lest you misunderstand, when Jesus used the word "love," he was not necessarily talking about being in an intimate relationship with another person, or even being a close friend. In the Biblical understanding of love, justice is a form of love. Compassion is a form of love. Love, in the Biblical meaning of the word, means to treat other people — those you dislike, even your enemies — with respect, dignity, and compassion. It is the opposite of using another person for your purposes. It is the opposite of manipulating another person.

In many of his parables, Jesus illustrated this point. One of my very favorite parables on this subject is the one about the sheep and the goats. The compassionate people in this story are surprised to discover that they are connected with God and that God's love is alive in them. They wondered how and when this happened.

God, the great "I AM," answers them: "For I was hungry, and you gave me food. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger, and you welcomed me. I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you took care of me. I was in prison, and you visited me."

Those who have been compassionate are totally surprised. They ask in amazement: "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? When was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? When was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?"

"I AM" answers, "As you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it unto me." That's the way the branches stay connected to the vine. "Beloved, let us love one another ... God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." Amen.