

A sermon preached for the Church of the Nativity, Boyne City, Michigan, on the Sixth Sunday of Easter, 9 May 2021 (also Mothers' Day), by the Reverend Dr. J. Barrington Bates (Year B, RCL).

Today is Rogation Sunday, when the church has traditionally offered prayer for God's blessing on the fruits of the earth and the labors of humankind.

The word "rogation" is from the Latin *rogare*, to ask. Historically, the Rogation Days are a period of fasting and abstinence, asking God's blessing on the crops, for a bountiful harvest.

Ancient pagan observances of something called "robigalia" included processions through the cornfields to pray for the preservation of the crops from mildew.

And Christian honoring of Rogation Days has varied over the centuries: from observance on the fixed date of April 25 to great outdoor processions on the Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday before Ascension Day.

Elizabeth I of England ordered the "perambulation of the parish" at Rogationtide, a custom still observed in many places.

This brings to mind an image of our processing down Water Street, declaring everything within the geographic boundaries of this parish to be specially set apart and consecrated as holy, pronouncing to every soul we encounter the liberation offered through the mediation of Jesus Christ, and staking our claim for the working out of the plan of salvation and the bringing of God's kingdom here in earth. It's a glorious image, isn't it?

And, of course, in older days, the clergy had the responsibility of what we used to call the "cure of souls" within the parochial boundaries.

That is, *everyone* within these lines was technically a member of the parish. Every institution was a chaplaincy concern. Not just every Episcopalian— *every single person*.

And Rogation Sunday was a time to "beat the bounds"—to walk around the boundary of a parish, to be certain you knew just where those boundaries were and who was inside them.

In some places, they had the custom of taking a small child, holding him by the legs, and bouncing him on his head at the corners of the boundary.

I'm not suggesting we revive the custom, but the idea of "beating the bounds" has a certain relevancy to present-day boundary issues.

Boundaries are a hot topic. Boundaries are pretty much *always* a hot topic.

Bookstores abound with resources for setting and keeping healthy boundaries.

These books tell us when to say "yes," and when to say "no." They encourage you to "take control of your life" and to stop "hiding from love." The objective is becoming separate, individual, and autonomous.

Now, healthy boundaries are a *good* thing. They help us live more fulfilling lives, respecting others and respecting ourselves. They help us overcome depression, codependency, and anxiety—and to avoid unnecessary anger and hurt.

And, yet, as good as healthy boundaries can be, and as useful as they are—Jesus appears to be telling us something altogether different about boundaries.

In the Gospels, his message is *not* about keeping a healthy balance between work and home, *not* about maintaining respectful distance from others.

No. He is in the Father, and we are in him, and he in us. It is clear he does *not* mean we are separated from God in any way.

Jesus says, “the world will no longer see me, but you will see me,” as if to say the boundaries between the visible and the invisible will change.

And, if you do not understand what this means, Jesus promises that the Spirit will come—an event the church commemorates this Thursday, Ascension Day.

And that other Advocate not only will be with us for ever, that Spirit will also abide with us, and be *in* us. For Jesus, you see, it’s all about being in relationship, connected, a part of the larger body, walking together in the Way.

The image Jesus offers of living a separate, autonomous life is horrifying: as those who do not abide in him are thrown away like a branch, will wither, be thrown into a fire, and be burned.

You may remember this famous quotation: ‘No man is an island, entire of it self; every man is a piece of the *Continent*, a part of the *main*.’ John Donne, the poet and priest who wrote those words some 400 years ago, seemed to understand. For Donne, as for Jesus, boundaries are an invention of foolish humankind.

I remember when I first came to appreciate Jesus’ wisdom on boundaries. Way back when I was in high school, a group of us boys did the unimaginable: we literally transgressed the boundaries and left school in the middle of the day, boarded a bus, and headed for a city park. There, we spent the afternoon in the sunshine, listening to speeches and music. It was the very first Earth Day celebration, back in 1970.

Earth Day—something we observed a few weeks ago on April 22nd for the 50th time. In 1970, we heard about things like recycling—something then pretty much unknown, but now pretty much taken for granted. We heard about pollution, and about the need for transportation alternatives to personal automobiles—things now well known, but not much addressed yet.

And we heard many songs, and one in particular that sticks with me; it began “Hello, carbon monoxide,” and its refrain proclaimed, “The air, the air, it’s everywhere.”

The air we breathe: Suddenly we were aware of it, and concerned about it. Was it safe, or full of particulates and carcinogens? How could we work to see its quality improve, rather

than continue to decline? Every breath we take in—and every breath we exhale—comes from, and returns to, the air.

Now, Jesus' metaphor is beginning to make sense. For we know now that we in the United States cannot have pollution-belching factories without affecting the quality of the air in Europe, or China—or everywhere, for that matter.

And the reverse is also true: what other countries do affects us.

We know that smell and smoke and carbon dioxide erode the earth's ozone layer, making us all more vulnerable to harm from ultraviolet light, leading to more severe global climate change.

And, given the weather in the past few years, nobody argues that the climate isn't changing anymore, do they?

And in these days of coronavirus, there are some who insist "my body, my choice" and refused to be vaccinated. That's just so selfish, because it isn't just about *you*; it's about all of *us*, as well.

We are beginning to understand—as a culture, as a political society, and perhaps as a church—what Jesus seemed to understand nearly two thousand years ago: we are all part of *one* vine, all connected, all interrelated.

When we realize this, we stop trying to work for our own selfish gain at the expense of others, for we know that harm done to *anyone* is ultimately harm done to ourselves.

When we admit we are part of the true vine, we begin to draw nourishment from each other, instead of competing and fighting with each other.

Jesus' message could not be clearer: there are *no* true boundaries. We are all part of *one* vine, all connected, all interrelated.

This is not to say that the kinds of things we call "boundary issues" don't have merit, or that "healthy boundaries," as society understands them, are not good things.

If *any of us* realized we are all part of one vine, we would search out ways to cooperate with each other and serve the common good, instead of championing our individual and partisan interests.

We in the church can perhaps understand this best, for Jesus tells us he is the true vine, and his Father is the vine grower.

We are part of him, and he is part of us, and we are—all of us—rooted in the dirt, the same earth that connects us to every living thing: every plant, every person, every molecule, and every rock.

Everything we think or do affects this world—sometimes in small ways, sometimes in very big ones. Every time we cry, the world cries with us. Every time we laugh, the world laughs along. Every time we sin, the world is damaged by our actions.

But when we do our best, when we try to respect others, when we seek to follow in God's ways—then the vine thrives, more shoots are sent out, leaves appear, and then, in God's good time, the rich harvest of fruit comes: Grapes for eating, for drying into raisins, for fermenting into wine, seeds to be planted for harvests yet to come.

This is the good news of Rogation Sunday, of Earth Day, and really of *every* day.

This is the message of the angels, as brought to earth in the person of Christ Jesus.

This is the hope for our salvation, the fruit of our inheritance, the future of our children.

This is part of what the Holy Spirit has come to teach us, and accepting it is part of our collective healing.

And recognizing our interdependence is not simply a *Christian* value. As His Holiness the Dalai Lama said, "Because we all share this planet earth, we have to learn to live in harmony and peace with each other and with nature. This is not just a dream, but a necessity."

We are *all of us* part of the one true vine. Isn't that a great message for Mothers' Day?

God is not only *with* us, but actually also *in* us—whether we recognize it or not. For the God of all grace has called us all to eternal glory in Christ, and will restore, support, strengthen, and establish us. This spirit of truth lives *with* us and *in* us.

Our God the God of grace and glory, the God of hope and truth, the God who abides in us and with us for ever.

May we all come to rejoice in the truth of that most happy news.