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**“Metaphor as Healing”**  
**A sermon by Marilyn Hedgpeth**

**5th Sunday of Easter (Year B)**  
**April 29, 2018**  
Acts: 8:26-40, 1 John 4:7-12, **John 15:1-8**

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In her seminal work, *Illness as Metaphor*, author Susan Sontag

writes in 1978, “Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship.

Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well

and in the kingdom of the sick.

Although we prefer to use only the good passport,

sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell,

to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.”

(Sontag, Susan. “Illness as Metaphor”. *New York Review*, January 26, 1978.)

Sontag argues that we have a human tendency to use metaphoric thinking

about illness in a way that tends to isolate people, to cut them

off from “normal” existence, to relegate them to *that other kingdom*.

She wrote this in the wake of her own arduous recovery

from breast cancer, which she never specifically mentions in her works.

But she does mention the way mystique can envelope diseases, such as tuberculosis

and mental illness in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or cancer and AIDS in the 20<sup>th</sup> century,

thus making an afflicted person feel doomed, shamed, afraid, and marginalized.

Jesus says, “I am the vine, you are the branches. If you remain in me,  
and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”

(John 15: 5)

Jesus offers his vining, entwining gospel medicine to those who may feel cut off  
and stigmatized by disease or disability, by wrong-doing or addiction,  
or by accident of birth – which is pretty much all of us  
at certain points in our lives!

Jesus offers healing in the form of metaphor, *I am the vine*, to those who  
are ostracized and caste-out, by social caste systems that may stigmatize and  
relegate us to other kingdoms, at no fault of our own.

Jesus, the true vine, the true metaphor, goes head to head with the false metaphors  
of culture, to offer what they cannot: dignity, courage, connection,  
shalom, healing, mercy, grace and hope to those entrapped  
by the onerous thinking and pigeon-holing of society.

How might a metaphor have that much power, you might ask?

Well, if metaphor has the power to condemn citizens of the kingdom of the sick  
to life as an outsider, as Sontag posits;

then it certainly stands that a counter-cultural metaphor, like Jesus, the true vine,  
can have just as much power to reverse the curse

in ways that save, restore and reconnect those same persons.

After all, Jesus himself said, “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” (John 3: 17)

A good metaphor, like a Good Shepherd, has the power to save what gets lost.

I remember taking my mother to the church on a beautiful Easter Sunday in 1979.

She asked her family to take her, after having endured a month of radiation treatments for the metastatic breast cancer which she was fighting.

I still can picture her in my mind, in a green cotton dress, wearing a wig to cover her recent hair loss, sitting at the back of the church, so as not to draw undue attention to herself.

She teared up, I remember, as the congregation sang, “Jesus Christ is Risen Today”.

She was so happy to be among the kingdom of the well morning.

She was moved to be one of the branches reconnecting to the true vine, the risen Christ.

But a good friend who sat nearby during the service, one of her best friends, actually, leaned over and tapped me on the shoulder during worship to whisper,

“She shouldn’t be here, you know; she’s too sick.”

And in my young, pre-ministry days, I felt some choice expletives rising in my throat, which I had to fight hard to suppress.

I think my response was something along these lines:

“Well, if the sick can’t be in church on Easter Sunday, then who can be?”

That’s straight out of Martin Luther’s handbook, by the way, borrowed from Augustine, where the church is defined as “a hospital for the incurably sick”.

*(Luther's Works, XVI, 346)*

Jesus said, "I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener...."remain in me,  
and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself." (15: 1,4)

In John's Gospel, Jesus counsels and prays with his disciples

following their last supper together,

before he is betrayed and handed over to detractors,

knowing that his disciples likely will face similar hardship, persecution

and trauma as they follow in his footsteps.

He encourages them to stay close to him by placing their trust in him alone,

rather than trying to go it alone, trusting in their own strength.

My mother did not want to go it alone, either, in her battle with cancer.

She wanted to remain "in Christ", the true vine. And she wanted to remain

in relationship with her true-branch friends, who walked with her every day.

During her illness, she once said that the phone was the greatest thing ever invented,

because it kept her connected to those whom she loved.

We also are phone lovers, iphone lovers, smart phone lovers,

and we have no trouble at all confessing our deep need for staying connected.

Facebook is glaring proof of that, don't you think?

In the wake of Mark Zuckerberg's recent testimony on Capitol Hill,

I heard again that the ubiquitous Facebook's market value easily

exceeds that of Walmart;

which signifies to me that people likely value and crave being connected,  
and staying connected to each other more than they value food, clothing,  
make-up, sporting goods, and other Walmart-esque amenities.

We desire to be citizens of the same kingdom, not expats living kingdoms apart.

An article deeply tucked away in *The Economist* shocked me recently:

*The number of Americans ending their own lives continues to rise.*

Thirty-three people leapt to their deaths from the Golden Gate Bridge last year;

that's thirty-three of the 1,123 Americans who took their own lives in 2016.

For every two women who commit suicide, there are seven men.

White men kill themselves at nearly three times the rate of black,

Hispanic and Asian men, making it one of a few health crises

that disproportionately affects whites.

The suicide rate in rural counties is 78% higher than in big cities;

the suicide rate in red states is higher than that in most blue states.

With the easy access to firearms in America, there are roughly two gun suicides

for every gun homicide.

And the high rate of suicide seems to have risen independently of dips and peaks

in the economy. (*The Economist*, March 31, 2018)

And so I have to wonder, where was the church, the hospital for the incurably sick,

when these people needed us the most?

Did some well-meaning church friend perhaps stage whisper during worship:

“He shouldn't be here; he has a pain pill problem.

She shouldn't be here; she's into gambling, you know.

They shouldn't be here; their marriage is a mess.

He shouldn't be here; I hear he's addicted to porn.

She shouldn't be here; her bi-polar is flaring.

I shouldn't be here, I don't deserve this company."

Did separation from the true vine, result in desperation, cutting these people off  
from the fellowship, grace, love and hope that gives vine-life?

And did the church, perhaps, fail in our mission to keep these people connected  
to the life-line, the life-vine, Jesus Christ, and to other nurturing branches?

Jesus was pre-telephone, pre-iPhone, pre-Facebook, but he certainly knew  
the need and the power of human beings remaining in contact with one another,  
and abiding in mutual connectedness for health, for love, and for life.

Jesus is the vine, God is the vine-dresser, we are the branches;  
and in our triangular relatedness, love courses through our phloem and xylem  
in our mutual abiding.

Jesus' greatest commandment cannot be far outside our metaphorical thinking,  
as we remember his mandate to love God, the gardener, with all of our heart,  
and with all of our soul, and with all of our mind,  
and all of our strength;  
and to love our neighbor/branches as ourselves.

His metaphor of the vine and branches is tenacious, entwining, healing  
and life-giving in its suggested relatedness, and in its power

to restore us to our true identity, meaning and purpose  
in connection to the great “I am”.

And I apologize on behalf of the church, to those whom we have failed  
to keep connected to the true vine, to those whom we have not nurtured  
as worthy branches, and to those whom we have relegated  
to another kingdom by our neglect and failure to connect.

We, the church, have failed at times to realize and remember that  
people only heal in relationship to others; to Vine and to branch.

We also tend to forget, Paul’s description of the church as a body with many parts,  
and with those parts that seem the weakest,  
being most deserving of treatment with special honor.

“God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor  
to the parts that lacked it,” Paul says, “so that there should be no division...

If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored,  
every part rejoices with it.” (1 Corinthians 12: 24-26)

Kate Bowler, a Duke Divinity Professor, who at age 35 was diagnosed with  
stage 4 cancer, has written a wonderful new book called,

*Everything Happens For a Reason, and Other Lies I’ve Loved.*

I commend it to you, and we will read it together this summer in Faith and Community.

She shares her internal dialogue with us as she meditates on matters  
of certainty and doubt,

on encouraging, empowering and disabling comments she continues to receive,

and on her reflections about the great mystery of faith.

She writes:

*In those first few days after my diagnosis, when I was in the hospital,*

*I couldn't see my son, I couldn't get out of bed, and I couldn't say for certain  
that I would survive the year.*

*But I felt as though I'd uncovered something like a secret about faith.*

*Even in lucid moments, I found my feelings so difficult to explain.*

*I kept saying the same thing: "I don't want to go back. I don't want to go back."*

*At a time when I should have felt abandoned by God, I was not reduced to ashes.*

*I felt like I was floating, floating on love and prayers of all those  
who hummed around me like worker bees,  
bringing notes and flowers and warm socks and quilts embroidered  
with words of encouragement.*

*When they sat beside me, my hand in their hands, my own suffering*

*began to feel like it had revealed to me the suffering of others,*

*a world of those who, like me, are stumbling in the debris of dreams they thought*

*they were entitled to and plans they didn't realize they had made.*

*That feeling stayed with me for months. In fact, I had grown so accustomed*

*to that floating feeling that I started to panic at the prospect of losing it.*

*So I began to ask friends, theologians, historians, pastors I knew, and nuns I liked,*

*"What am I going to do when it's gone?"*



*And they knew exactly what I meant because they had either felt it themselves,  
or read about it in great works of Christian theology.*

*St. Augustine called it “the sweetness.” Thomas Aquinas called it something  
mystical like “the prophetic light.” But all said yes, it will go.*

*The feelings will go. The sense of God’s presence will go.*

*There will be no lasting proof that God exists.*

*There will be no formula for how to get it back.*

*But they offered me this small bit of certainty, and I clung to it.*

*When the feelings recede like the tides, they said, they will leave an imprint.*

*I would somehow be marked by the presence of an unbidden God.”*

*(Bowler, Kate. Everything Happens For a Reason, p. 121-122)*

Jesus said, I am the vine, you are the branches. Remain in me,

and I will remain in you, so that you might bear the fruit of “notes,

and flowers and warm socks and quilts embroidered with words of *encouragement*”;

the fruit of invitation, of inclusion, of sitting with, of sharing a meal

or taking a meal, of visiting, of holding hands, of random acts of kindness,

of calling, of texting, of listening, of catching a cup of coffee

or sharing glass of viney-wine together, perhaps;

so that you might be with and for others, keeping them connected to the vine,

as I am with and for you, present in so many ways, now and forever. Amen.

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*Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.*

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