

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Set a vining house plant or a tree branch in the center of your group. Recall with your group vines and plants you have struggled to prune and shape. Name and identify people on your family tree or your parish vine from whom you branch out and have received a sense of the life and love Christians share in Jesus Christ.

LEADER: Jesus, you are the vine that has branched out to the ends of the earth.

ALL: We live in your love.

LEADER: Jesus, you are the vine that has branched out through the centuries.

ALL: We live in your love.

LEADER: Creator God, you grow the vine; we are your branches in our world today.

ALL: We live in your love.

An adventure with vines began when I planted a few squash seeds at one corner of our small cement patio. The seeds sprouted; the vines spread, began blossoming, and grew around the patio, up an evergreen, and over the fence next door. I learned not every blossom produces a squash, which is why some folks eat the blossoms. The vines produced only three squash.

My neighbor next door planted seeds again the next year. The vines overran the fence, overshadowing my beans and tomato plants. I learned

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to prune and redirect their growth. Another neighbor's grape vine came up and over the five-foot wooden fence between our yards, so I cut it back. Vines have little regard for barriers and show vigorous life from root to farthest shoot.

A vine is a great image of Church. Its single root is in Jesus Christ and its mission is to grow to the ends of Earth. In Sunday's gospel Jesus uses vines to talk about his relationship to all who follow him.

Artist Pat Owen, who spent two years in the Peace Corps in Senegal, West Africa, spread concern for a woman held in detention for lack of legal documents. The woman came to the U.S. as a fiancée. The man was so violent she refused to marry him, found a janitorial job, and began to put herself through college.

The man kept her papers. War in her home country made getting new documents impossible. Immigration first required her to

wear an ankle bracelet and then held her in detention for six months.

Pat created a set of 24 postcards, each depicting a moment in the evolution of the cosmos, each also saying, "You are loved." The postcards conveyed friendship and commitment toward the woman's cause and expressed faith in the God who irrepressibly blesses us with life.

Pat's friends took packs of cards to send wherever they went. The woman in detention set the record for the most mail one detainee ever received and shared them with others. The postcards spread like a living vine to express solidarity.

● When have you experienced a shared commitment energizing a community?



GOSPEL

We live in God's love.



JESUS 1: I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower who removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit the Father prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.

JESUS 2: Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.

JESUS 3: I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown into the fire and burned.

JESUS 4: If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

John 15:1-8

- How does Jesus' vine image speak to you?
- What is an important way you use your capacity to love and give new life?

The Sundays of Easter explore the persisting friendship between the risen Jesus and his disciples. To reflect on the life we share, the lectionary provides us familiar images—last Sunday Jesus as a good shepherd, this Sunday Jesus as the vine and we its branches. No one image fully expresses the communion of life we share with Jesus and through Jesus with God.

In Jesus' time shepherds shared the life of their sheep, camped outside at night to protect them, put their own bodies in the door of the sheepfold to keep them in, and put their own lives on the line for their sheep. Good shepherds persist and endure in their caring for their sheep, always present with them. Jesus, the good shepherd, embodies God's steadfast love.

A vine is a single plant. All its branches share the life its roots draw from the soil and its leaves from the sun. A vine can spread extravagantly from its roots but one life flows through the whole plant. The branches abide on the vine.

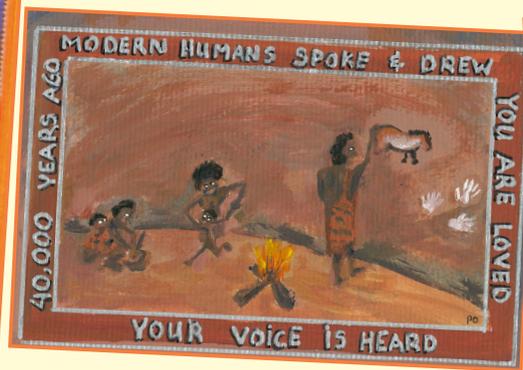
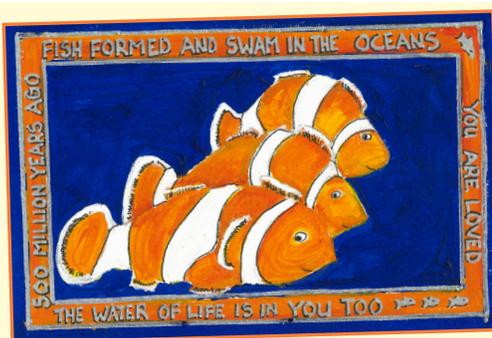
Jesus calls us to bear fruit.

Sunday's gospel comes from Jesus' farewell to his disciples after the last supper. The image of the vine expresses the heart of Christian spirituality in John's gospel. His disciples and the risen Jesus remain connected. Disciples live in Jesus, who is risen and alive in us.

The love of the risen Jesus sustains the Christian community. Disciples tap into the common vein of life that runs through the vine, branching throughout history

and spreading throughout the world. Eight times in Sunday's gospel Jesus repeats the word *abide*. It means *to remain with, to continue in mutual relationship*.

As disciples who believe God raised up Jesus from the dead, we bear fruit through living out our faith in God's life-giving power and the promise of Jesus' resurrection.



Friendship with Jesus lasts into his risen life. It remains. Communion of life persists. The risen Jesus is at home in his disciples and they are at home with him. Jesus dwells or abides in them and they abide or dwell in him. We live in God's love as Jesus does.

When Jesus says, "I am the vine," he makes one of a series of "I am" statements in John's gospel. John's gospel proclaims in this way that Jesus is God.

The Christian community has grown over the centuries and throughout the globe, yet all of us Christians live from a common source and on a single vine. The vine is Jesus, who embodies divine love among us. The vine is an image of the communion of saints, living and dead, all of us who live in Jesus' love and share God's life as he does.

● **In what relationships do you abide? How do these relationships help you understand your relationship with Jesus and with God?**

The Father is the vine grower in Jesus' vine analogy. The vine grower prunes the vines to bear more fruit or to remove branches that don't bear fruit. Jesus explains that the word

he teaches cleanses us. The same Greek word *kathairie* can be translated either *cleanses* or *prunes*, depending on the context.

The word *catharsis* comes from this same root and refers to an emotional or psychological cleansing. The Greeks regarded drama as healing because actors played out the effects of human pride or vengeance for the audience to experience and learn from vicariously.

Jesus' words live in us and keep working in us to transform us. They have a continuing cleansing or converting effect.

● **How has Jesus' word had ongoing transformative effects in your life?**

Today the gospel calls us to bear fruit in a world that is global and cosmic. The Second Vatican Council challenges us to make our own the joys and anxieties, the grief and anguish, of the poor and afflicted. This is a call to solidarity, to respond to the people of Earth as a common family. It is also an abiding ethical challenge in our market-driven society that measures success in wealth, not relationships.

Like a vine the principles of Catholic social teaching cross borders and boundaries with ease and extend the dignity of being made in God's image and the rights of the human person to all. Care for the poor and care for Earth go hand in hand as Pope Francis insists in the exhortation *Laudato Si': Care for our Common Home*.

We are all artisans of the common good. How we drive helps set the tone of the neighborhood. Our willingness to wear sweaters in winter saves heat. Our contributions save lives; our welcoming attitudes help immigrants resettle.

The Father vinegrower is the Creator of all that is. Like a vine unfolding from a single seed, evolution unfolds from the singular energy of the big bang. We humans are inextricably part of all that is. Our being alive is the gift and fruit of God's irrepressible love, our call to love one another in return.

Our roots in Jesus' life and love empower us to branch out and bear fruit where we live: to call others to faith in Jesus, to serve our families and communities, to make the small differences that build the common good.

● **What fruit can the Church as a global vine bear in the world? How can you act in solidarity?**

● **What fruit do you produce on your branch of the vine?**



Cosmos Cards

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Like Paul, people can change.

Sunday's first reading from Acts shows how fear can threaten the branching life of the vine. Out of fear, disciples are slow to accept Paul. His reputation precedes him.

The Christians in Jerusalem know Paul only as one who persecuted them. They can't believe he has really changed. Barnabas alone befriends Paul, explains how Paul saw and conversed with the Lord on the road, and reports that he has been speaking out fearlessly in the name of Jesus in Damascus.

As Paul begins to speak out in Jerusalem in Jesus' name, Greek-speaking Jews seek to kill him. The persecutor becomes the persecuted. The deepest questions are at issue: Who is your God? Is Jesus God?

As believers send Paul home to Tarsus, Luke reports on the state of the vine. The churches are growing in Judea, the land around Jerusalem where Jesus had been put to death; in Galilee, Jesus' home region where some cast him out; and in Samaria, whose religious tradition formerly kept them apart from Jews.

Paul went on from Tarsus to travel the Mediterranean world by boat and by foot, speaking boldly of Jesus in the big cities of his day. He founded and pastored Christian communities where he went. Educated as a Jewish rabbi, Paul skillfully engaged his audiences in theological debates and wrote

letters that have enriched and challenged Christian communities ever since.

The Holy Spirit that animates the early Christian communities prompts us into speaking out and acting today. Christians respond to new needs such as advocating for better immigrant legislation, helping people trafficked as sex workers or sweatshop workers to freedom and fruitful life. Paul's story reminds us persecutors can become believers and advocates.

Paul speaks boldly in Jesus' name.

When he had come to Jerusalem, Paul attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles, and described for them how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus.

So Paul went in and out among them in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He spoke and argued with the Hellenists, but they were attempting to kill him. When the believers learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built

up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

Acts 9.26-31

- In what ways do people's reputations, experiences, or others' reports about them keep us from receiving and welcoming them as Jesus would?
- Whose speech do you hear boldly upbuilding the Church today?

PRAY

Looking at the plant or branch set before you, try to identify one specific thing you can do to bring new life, love, or forgiveness to a family or community member. Make a commitment to yourself or aloud to one another, naming what you intend to do. Then, join hands and pray or sing together:

ALL: God is love, and we who abide in love abide in God, and God in us.



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DO SOMETHING

CHARITY

JUSTICE

- Catholic social teaching stresses our interdependence as a human family and calls us to solidarity as our brothers' and sisters' keepers, wherever they live. Use such websites as Catholiccharitiesusa.org or coc.org to explore issues of local and global solidarity.