

Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year B
Acts 9:26-31
Ps 22 *passim*
1Jn 3:18-24
Jn 15:1-8

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Today is the second of three Sundays where our Gospel readings are taken from the Gospel of John. For the past two weeks the Gospels have focused on the relationship between Jesus and the Christian. Jesus has been using metaphors. Last week it was the image of the sheep who recognize the shepherd's voice and of the shepherd who protects the sheep and lays down his life for them. This week Jesus draws an image from agriculture: he calls himself the vine and his followers the branches.

There is solid historical evidence that even back in biblical times vinedressers followed the practice of grafting the vines of one variety of grapes onto the rootstock of some other variety. When a certain variety of grape was desired that only selected vines would produce, oftentimes the vinedresser, in hopes of yielding a better harvest, would splice the vines into the rootstock of some other variety, chosen for its hardiness, perhaps because it's better adapted to the climate or is more resistant to pests or blight. And so Jesus uses the grafting of vines onto rootstocks as an image of how disciples should relate to himself.

And John the Evangelist uses a specific word to describe that relationship. It's a key to understanding and appreciating John's Gospel. That word is the Greek verb μένειν, which transcribed into our alphabet is spelled *menein*. *Menein*. The Scripture scholars who make it their business to know such things tell us that *menein* in various forms occurs 112 times in the original texts of the New Testament, and 66 of those times – nearly 70% – show up in the writings of John the Evangelist.

It's a key, I said, but it's heavily disguised because in English *menein* gets translated in lots of different ways. Sometimes it's "stay." In chapter 1, St. John says that two of John the Baptist's disciples asked Jesus, "Where are you staying?" *Menein*. In response Jesus invited them to come and see and, the text says, "they went and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day." *Menein*. So what, you ask? Well, St. John is telling us that a disciple is one who "stays" with Jesus. A few verses earlier, John the Baptist says that at the baptism of Jesus he "saw the Spirit come down like a dove from the sky and *remain* upon him. I did not know him," he goes on, "but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'On whomever you see the Spirit come down and *re-main*, he is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.'" *Menein*. In today's Gospel passage, we heard that same verb "remain" eight times. "*Remain* in me, as I *remain* in

you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it *remains* on the vine, so neither can you unless you *remain* in me." *Menein*. Sometimes it gets translated as "dwell." At the beginning of chapter 14, Jesus tells his disciples, "In my Father's house there are many *dwelling* places." A few verses later, "The words that I speak to you I do not speak on my own. The Father who *dwells* in me is doing his works." And then still a few more verses later we hear, "Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come and make our *dwelling* with him." *Menein, menein, menein*.

Some Scripture scholars suggest that the English-language word that captures the meaning and flavor of *menein* best is "abide." Jesus tells us that just as he abides in the Father and the Father abides in him, so we must abide in him and he will abide in us. I like the idea of "abiding." It means, to me, that the Christian's connection to Jesus is more than just a link; it's a matter of rootedness. We are called to be *rooted* in Christ, to be grafted onto Christ.

It occurs to me that another word would fit. How about "stick with"? Jesus promises to stick with us and we in turn are called to stick with Jesus. And in sticking with Jesus we never get stuck. Stuck means we stop growing, we stop developing, and that's not what Jesus wants. In chapter 10 of John's Gospel – the Good Shepherd chapter – Jesus says, referring to his sheep, that he "came that they might have life and have it more abundantly."

It is sometimes said that success in parenting consists in two things: giving your children roots when they are little and wings when they grow up. Isn't it similar with God? The roots we have in Jesus give us the strength and the courage and the knowhow to spread our wings and fly when the time comes. What does it mean to abide in Jesus? That's the subject of next Sunday's Gospel, but I'll give you a preview: Jesus says that abiding in him means keeping his commandments. And there he's not talking about a set of rules. He's talking about the commandment he revealed on Holy Thursday while washing the feet of his apostles. "I give you a new commandment," he says. "Love one another as I have loved you."

We are each called to ponder how we are rooted in Jesus and how rooted we are in Jesus. Do I think about him? Do I spend time with him? Today a group of our 2nd-graders are making their First Holy Communion; they are receiving Jesus in the Holy Eucharist for the very first time. Their fervor, joy, and excitement inspire us. Would that we could summon up once again the same fervor, joy, and excitement! And so we ask: Do I receive him in the Eucharist *mindfully*? or am I just going through the motions? What am I doing to nurture my vital union with Jesus? Do I abide in him? Do I let him abide in me?

Do I accept the Spirit whom he has sent and invite the Holy Spirit to dwell in me? Do I genuinely stick with him?

When I reach the end of my days here on earth, I hope that my family and friends will look back and say, "In his own way Bob was a Christ-like guy: he lived a Christ-like life." I know, however, that I have my work cut out for me. The only way to be like Christ is to stick with him, to spend time with him, to be rooted in him, to remain in him, to abide in him, and to so empty myself in self-giving love as to let him abide in me.