

A Sermon for the 6th Sunday of Easter, Rogation Sunday, April 27, 2008
Immanuel Episcopal Church, Hanover County, Virginia
by the Reverend David H. Knight, Interim Rector

In the Name of God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

One of the rich blessings of being able to live in this part of the country is that we are surrounded by the beauty of God's creation. This beauty is evident these days as so much is bursting into full bloom. Growing things with all that is involved, such as necessary pruning, brings to mind images to which you and I can relate as we hear Jesus as he speaks of himself as the true vine, and of God as the vine grower.

In the Church's tradition, this Sunday has been set aside as a Sunday to observe with particular reverence the beauty of God's creation. It has sometimes been the custom in parishes for a congregation to process around the boundaries of the church property and bless the trees and plantings. While we will not be processing around the boundaries of Immanuel's property we will, at the conclusion of (the 11:00 service) (this service) process from the church out to the site of the newly planted red oak tree. This tree was planted to replace the beautiful old tree that was destroyed in a storm last year. It is a symbol of our commitment to renew a part of nature that was lost. It is also a symbol of our faith in the future of God's creation. While the old tree provided shelter, shade, comfort as well as beauty for generations, this new young tree will, in time, provide the same for generations yet unborn. It is also an act of faithful stewardship of God's creation.

As Jesus speaks of himself as the vine and God as the vine grower, he also speaks of each of us as the branches. Through the waters of our baptism, you and I are connected to God through Jesus Christ. We are also connected to each other as we are incorporated into the Body of Christ. We are also connected to all of creation. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it remains connected to the vine, neither can you and I bear fruit unless we remain connected to God and to one another and to creation itself, connected in ways that respect the dignity of God's creation. You may recall the late Dr. Albert Schweitzer, a medical missionary to the people Lambarene in Africa in the last century, whose theology of reverence for life set a standard that should serve as an inspiration to us all even in our own day. The story is told that when a new building or wing was being added to his hospital, great care was taken to preserve nature and move to a safe place whatever was possible so as not to destroy God's creation in the process of building.

In today's gospel reading as well as in the lesson from the Acts of the Apostles our connectedness to God and to one another is clear. In the Acts of the Apostles, "For in him we live and move and have our being... We too are his offspring." In the gospel, Jesus reminds us that we can bear fruit only as we remain in community with each other. We cannot bear fruit if we become lone rangers. We cannot remain close to God if we neglect our connections with one another. We cannot remain close to creation if we if we abuse what God has placed in our care--this fragile earth, our island home. In Eucharistic Prayer C, there is the reminder to us that God brought forth the human race, and blessed us with memory, reason, and skill. The prayer continues, "You made us the rulers of creation. But we turned against you, and betrayed your trust; and we turned against one another." As Jesus speaks of us as branches connected to the vine, he is calling us to be stewards of our relationships with each other whether it be in our marriages, our friendships, partnerships, the relationships where we work or worship. He calls us as well, to be stewards of our vocations, to give our very best effort.

He is calling us to be stewards of our environment as well. The movie which came out a couple of years ago, "An Inconvenient Truth", is a reminder that the future of this fragile earth, our island home, hangs in the balance. It is high time we make the necessary adjustments that may cause us to do things in a different way as individuals, as a nation, and as a community of nations, so as to ensure the future of this planet. Only if we are in denial can we ignore the warnings before us. I watched the other night as there were clips of a banquet in Washington where some of our nation's leaders spoke. Apparently there was supposed to be some humor. At one point, the vice president got up to speak. If I heard him correctly, he said, "I know all about global warming. It is something that comes every spring." The audience laughed. I wanted to weep. Yes, as an isolated remark, there may have been a little humor, yet in the context of a long standing national policy resisting measures to protect the environment, I found his humor all too telling. We should at this time in our nation's history be looking for and demanding in public leaders and those running for office those who get it, that is, those who understand that together we must take action to care for this fragile earth, our island home. We should be demanding the same of ourselves as well, for we cannot live in selfish isolation from one another and act in a ways that continue to waste and pollute God's creation with our lack of concern for those who come after us as we are reminded in the Litany in the Prayer Book for Ash Wednesday.

Indeed, there are times when the Gospel calls us to pay attention to truths that might be inconvenient for us, yet these truths are life giving and life sustaining. In the words of the Acts of the Apostles this morning, "While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

This morning, here at Immanuel, may the planting of this tree be a symbol of our faith in the past and of our hope in the future. May it also be a reminder of God's call to us to be the best stewards we can possibly be of this fragile earth, our island home, and of the relationships that God entrusts to us along our earthly journey. As I think about what Jesus said about our being the branches, about what he said about how we are connected one to another, I am reminded of my wife Jeannie's grandfather, the late Arthur Littleton, a lawyer and Senior Partner of Morgan, Lewis, and Bockius in Philadelphia. A faithful Christian and staunch Presbyterian, a man of utmost integrity, he was as much a theologian as he was a lawyer. He was also considered by his colleagues to be a quintessential team player. He once said, "There is no limit to what can be accomplished if it makes no difference who receives the credit." That statement was a mark of his career and of his life and relationships with others. What Arthur Littleton said a generation ago applies to our life together in community as we are branches connected to God through Jesus Christ who is the vine, and we are connected to all of Creation. There is indeed no limit to what can be accomplished if it makes no difference who receives the credit. The implications of that connectedness about which he spoke reach into every aspect of our lives, for as Jesus said, "No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me." *Amen.*