

“Invasive Species”

Fourth in a Lent series on John 15

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)

John 15 (selected verses)

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I am the real vine and my Father is the vine grower. . . .

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Make your home in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will be at home in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and am at home in his love. . . .

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. . . .

You did not choose me but I chose you. I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

If the world hates you, know that it hated me before it hated you. If the world owned you, the world would love you as its own. Because you are not owned by the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you. Remember what I said to you, 'Servants are not greater than their master.' If they hunt me, they will hunt you. If they do what I say, they will do what you say. . . .

If I had not done among them the things that no one else did, they would not have sin. Now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. It was to keep what their law says: "They hated me for no good reason."

When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will give evidence for me. You also are to give evidence because you have been with me from the beginning.¹

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We've been in Jesus' teaching here for a few weeks now. He begins with him being the Vine and we being a branch. It is so vital for life, our life, our life together that we stay in him. It's this close, intimate relationship between Jesus and his people.

Jesus fills us with love. The Divine Love who is God, who wraps Jesus in the love of the Father and the Spirit, Jesus is pouring that love into you and me. Within our life together as his people, we are experiencing and learning the ways of his love as we love one another.

Then, as the branches of the vine spread and move, his love flows through us and

¹ John 15:1, 9-10, 12-13, 16-20, 22-27. I've adapted the NRSV translation.

overflows from us, bearing fruit, fruits of life into this world Jesus loves.

But this world does not love him back. In this world which he loves, Jesus encounters hate. This is the stark, shocking reality we smacked into last week. It's deeply perplexing. How is it that Jesus— who is God's goodness in the full, who is perfect love, who always acts with love, abundant and freely given—how is it that Jesus receives back hate?

Within hours of saying this, hatred will have killed Jesus.

What do we make of this? Was there something especially wrong with his opponents then, something about them that made them whom he loved into his enemies?

Or, do they in that time and place express something true of all of us, in ever time and place? A bitter, terrible truth about us?

Always remember, though, this one whom we make our Enemy is Jesus. Thank God! For makes himself our Friend.

II

We got into this last week. This is Jesus' diagnosis. It's his bright light which he shines into our dark corners. Do not be afraid to look. For with diagnosis comes the cure.

What Jesus says is thick, and maybe strange to us. So let me review, then pick up where I left off.

Start with this world, the *kosmos*, God's creation. It is beautiful and good, precious to God, loved by God.

But it has gone wrong. The *kosmos* turns against God. This turning is personal, each of us. This is social and communal: our networks, systems, communities, economies, governments, corporations, churches, cultures. All turned against God.

Imagine that the *kosmos* is this water. It's pure and good, a blessing for life. Add some terrible, toxic poison. Just a few drops. By far most of the mixture is still good water. Yet it's become all contaminated, all death.

The toxicity comes from us. And it gets into us. We are not who we are supposed to be. We are all part of this. We are responsible victimizers. We are all harmed by it. We are suffering victims. The *kosmos* is a mess, twisted and damaged, groaning and crying.

III

But fear not! Do not despair. God always is. God still loves. God loves God's *kosmos*—everything, all of us, and you within it. So in Jesus, God came in person into

the *kosmos*, to save it and set it right.

Perfect love encounters us. We let ourselves be embraced by him, trusting him to change us.

Or, we slap him away. This gets us to the "hate" part. Jesus creates a crisis. The *kosmos*' reacts to Jesus. The *kosmos* rejects Jesus. It expels him. We expel him. We crucified him. We finished him off, so he'd leave us alone to do our thing.

Thank God, he will not.

It's the wonder of the Cross and Resurrection. Jesus turned our rejection against us, for us. Call this "Our Glorious Defeat." Our attempted annihilation of him, he turned into his successful salvation of us.

This is where we got last week. Jesus does not finish there.

What he did for us, he now continues through us. Jesus is the Vine. We, his branches. Through his people, he is spreading his love—bearing fruit—into those corners wherever the poisoned fruits of un-love are found.

Jesus has saved us. He has called us. He is remaking us, detoxifying us with his cure: himself, perfect love. He is filling us with his Spirit, so we can be more and more like him.

Yes, us! You know yourself, and those sitting around you. So foolish of Jesus, choosing the likes of us. So astonishing, what the Holy Spirit can do with the likes of us.

Call it Jesus' "Branch strategy." Creating communities like this. We are tiny pockets, samples of him, moving out so others can taste and see the goodness and love of God.

IV

Remember, though, what happens to Jesus when the *kosmos* gets a taste of him.

Jesus warns us.

Because you are not owned by the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you. Remember what I said to you, 'Servants are not greater than their master.' If they hunt me, they will hunt you.

Remember his diagnosis of the *kosmos*. It's going to see him, and see us—Vine and branches—as an invasive species.

I realize that's a provocative image. Us, an invasive species? An invasive species is

some sort of wild life, plant or animal, that does not belong here. It's destructive to the environment. "Vine and branches" sounds nice. We like that way of describing us and Jesus. But "invasive species"?

If Jesus' diagnosis of the *kosmos* is accurate, however. . . . If the *kosmos* loves darkness more than light. . . . If things are a mess, poisoned and we've grown addicted to the poison. . . . If fear and hatred hold sway. . . .

. . . Then love and acts of love, when they confront hatred and fear, will be seen as dangerous, destructive, to be destroyed. Love, love shaped like Jesus, provokes a crisis.

V

Jesus warns us. There is no accusing him of sugarcoating things, or downplaying the costs of membership. As a strategy for recruiting people, that stinks.

But Jesus is not interested in recruiting us. He chooses us. Calls us. Summons us. And gets into us. No, he does not trick us or manipulate us. It's simply that when we are with him, we realize that there is nothing else worth doing but following him. Branches to the Vine.

And maybe we'll be hated for it.

I've got to confess, though. I don't know what to do with this.

I'd planned to devote one message to this teaching of Jesus. I'm at the end of number 2. I don't feel finished yet. What Jesus says here is so important, and deeply profound. It's important, and profound, and I don't get it.

Hated for belonging to Jesus? It does not fit my experience. Does it fit yours?

I certainly get it for those first followers of Jesus. They experienced it. And the first centuries of Jesus' people, when the movement was often outlawed and persecuted. And even today, in many places where Christians are hated and hunted because they belong to Jesus.

But us? Here? Now? Let's be grateful, I guess. But maybe we're missing something. I'm wondering.

Next week, Palm Sunday. Jesus arrives in the Holy City to the world's cheers. Within a week, the *kosmos* will have killed him.

Let's come back to this, and journey with him. Jesus who loves. Jesus who is hated. Jesus our friend. Amen.