

**THE TREE OF LIFE; JOHN 15:1-8; EASTER V; MAY 3, 2015; THOMAS H. YORTY;  
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Old Mother Earth keeps re-emerging, each spring, fresh as a debutante descending a winding staircase to her bevy of suitors and well-wishers; Buffalo in spring bloom is a fitting time to hear John's vision for the church as the vine and branches; and there are few depictions of it as stunning as the one right here in the dome of this chancel.

When you look at the vine and branches you cannot tell where one ends and the other begins. An organic unity holds the whole thing together; each branch is part of each branch; and here's the point – the entire entity exists for one purpose: to produce fruit, which, in this gospel is, unequivocally, to love; "I give you a new commandment," Jesus said, "to love one another."

John's vision that the church is like a vine and branches – Jesus the vine and we, the church, the branches – removes all hierarchy and individual distinction among the community.

Actually, there is one distinction among the branches: fruitlessness. Determining which branches are fruitless and to be pruned from the vine belongs to the gardener or God alone. The gardener's role is to prune the vine to make it more productive.

Otherwise all the branches are the same before God; there is neither status nor rank among the branches. All members or branches grow out of the one central vine and are tended equally by the one gardener.

John is saying the *only* measure of our place in the community – is to love as Jesus loved. Everyone, great and small, ordained and lay, male and female, young and old is equally accountable to that one standard. What makes the community distinctive is its relationship to God and Jesus, *not* the characteristics or even gifts of its members. The mark of the faithful community is how it loves, not who its members are.

By this definition, the church which is as much a part of the culture wars as the Tea Party or American Civil Liberties Union forfeits all the reasons it uses to divide itself.

All that finally matters for liberals and conservatives is whether they are, *whether we are bearing fruit*, that is, loving as Jesus loved.

If that is our goal rather than on which side of the political aisle we stand; we'd be closer to hitting the mark of who God expects us to be.

Here's an example of one branch bearing fruit: Paul, a medical resident here in Buffalo who is specializing in preventative medicine says his job is to keep people out of the hospital. He'll graduate with a specialty in internal and preventative medicine and a master's degree in public health.

After he graduates this year he will go to Cheyenne, WY where there is a sickly, obese population. He will be one of the first preventative medicine doctors there. He's very excited. He thinks he can make a difference.

What impressed me about Paul, oblivious to status and power, was his desire to serve people; to make them healthier, to enter a job market that will not be lucrative, and to live in a backwater community.

Or there's Callan Izatt, a member of our youth group, who emailed me two nights ago and asked if he could organize a fund-raiser for the victims of the Nepal earthquake. He proposed selling strips of colorful ribbon for five dollars that could then be tied to a clothes line and remind us of Nepal prayer flags – strips of cloth tied to sticks or poles placed at the base of mountains so that the wind will carry the prayers to the summit where the divine spirit lives.

I was deeply touched by Callan's compassion, by his desire to do something here in this community for victims half way around the world.

Callan is organizing the youth group; they have their booth up this morning in the Holmes Room, they'll be back the next two Sundays – more branches attached to the vine, bearing fruit.

Or there are all the nurses and aides we encountered on the third floor at Elderwood in Williamsville who took care of Carol's mother for the last month of her life, after her stroke.

It is work I cannot imagine doing. It is a calling. It is not a job that will make any of those women or men rich. It is a ministry that brings comfort and dignity to the dying, the demented, and to weary, exhausted family members.

They are branches attached, whether they know it or not, to Jesus; because Jesus is applauding them, each and every one of them on every shift from morning to night to morning again. They are his representatives, they are on the front line of the battle against darkness and despair and defeat.

On this day of the John Rutter Mass for Children I think of the children in this community and world: the kids who are caught in the fight over public education; the kids who are living – this morning – in underground water tunnels in Sana, Yemen to avoid the relentless bombing by Saudi Arabia; the kids of Nepal who were killed in the earthquake and those who survived and must find a way to stay alive each day; and kids of color in Baltimore and Ferguson and too many cities across the nation who are growing up in fear of law enforcement officers.

We don't have time to measure our ministry or define our community by anything else but love. We are each branches attached to the source of life that spun the whirling planets and got this whole thing going. Maybe you've noticed some green pods ready to burst open in your life and ministry as a parent or neighbor or employee or citizen.

There's a generation and world at risk. Our future is at stake. A church devoted to bearing the fruit of love is needed now more than ever.  
Amen.