

## SAFARI REFLECTIONS - 2017

### DAY ONE: GOD'S WORLD

#### **Scripture:**

*I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing. ~ John 15:5*

#### **Reflection:**

In our scripture today, Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing." Jesus used a lot of agrarian images because most people were farmers in his day. He was probably thinking of a grape vine when he came up with this vine and branches imagery, something members of his audience would have seen every day. Since there are few grape vines in our area, I want to look at a plant that is more familiar to us – tomatoes. Even those of us without yards or gardening talent often have potted tomato plants on our patios. They are a summer staple.

When you look at a tomato plant this time of year, it appears very sturdy. The stem is often as thick as a young sapling. Since tomatoes are typically either caged or staked, they often stand up to an impressive two and a half feet tall and spread out into a wide bushy plant. They are also laden with big pieces of fruit, and one could easily assume that since the fruit is large, the plant must be strong in order to hold it. The problem is that in reality, tomato plants are just the opposite of what they appear. The vines are fragile, even brittle, and can snap with even a gentle movement. The heavy fruit, whether ripe or not, can be knocked off the plant with even a slight bump.

I don't have to ask, even rhetorically, what happens to a branch that is snapped off the vine. We all know that the branch will wither and die, and that the branch won't be able to ripen fruit. That much is obvious and would have been obvious to Jesus' listeners also. Instead I will ask, why do Ohioans obsessively grow tomato plants in pots even when we don't have room for other plants? The answer lies in the fruit. The "pink" tomatoes sold at the grocery store can't compete with vine-ripened tomatoes. There is no comparison in taste. The vine-ripened tomato is wholly superior to the fruit which has been picked green and artificially ripened through a chemical process.

Keeping this image in our heads, let's look back at our verse for today: "I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing." Not just much fruit, but good fruit. Good, juicy, vine-ripened fruit which is wholly superior to anything which we can produce on our own.

#### **Questions for further thought:**

What kind of fruit are you bearing in your life? Are you trying to ripen it on your own, or are you remaining securely attached to the vine?

**Exercise:**

Make a list of the fruits of the Spirit found in Galatians 5:22-23a. Next to them write a list of your favorite fruits so that there is one edible fruit next to each fruit of the Spirit. Whenever you eat a fruit this week, look at the list and ask yourself how you have demonstrated the fruit of the Spirit listed next to it lately.

**Prayer:**

Holy Spirit, keep me securely fastened to the vine of the Holy Trinity. Help me to bear much good fruit in my life, and especially this week at Safari. Amen.

## **DAY TWO: GOD'S GIFTS**

### **Scripture:**

*The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. ~ Galatians 5:22-23a*

### **Reflection:**

Yeah, yeah, yeah, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. That's a great list of qualities for our children to memorize. We could probably set them to music and make a great Safari song out of them. But what does this verse really have to say to adults anyway?

Well, can you imagine a world without these qualities? Too often what we see on the news results from the lack of these qualities. That man shot his neighbor because he was lacking in gentleness and self-control. That woman abused her children because she lacked patience and kindness. That person overdosed on heroin because they were lacking love, joy, and peace. That family went hungry because their community lacked generosity. That Hollywood couple broke up because they both lacked faithfulness. Most of the problems in our world stem from a lack of these traits.

And what would it be like if those around us lacked these qualities? Can you imagine your workplace without self-control? Full of chaos and back-biting. Can you imagine going through the checkout at the grocery without shoppers using patience? Nobody wants to wait their turn. Can you imagine your home without joy? What a miserable place to return to every evening.

Perhaps the best question to ask is: what would you be like without these qualities? Take a moment to consider that. Each of us has each of these traits to some extent. Each of us needs to work on developing a different subset of these qualities because some of these behaviors come more readily than others to us based on our personalities. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (#1832) says, "The fruits of the Spirit are perfections that the Holy Spirit forms in us as the first fruits of eternal glory." It's good to know none of us is perfect and that we are all works in progress.

So back to the original question: what does this verse really have to say to adults anyway? It's our homework assignment from God. These are the character traits the Holy Spirit is working to perfect in us, but we have to meet the Spirit halfway and work to develop these traits ourselves.

### **Questions for further thought:**

Which of the fruits of the Spirit do I need to work on developing? How can I further develop these qualities in myself?

### **Exercise:**

Memorize today's verse as a reminder of what you need to work on.

**Prayer:**

Holy Spirit, you give us the fruits of the Spirit as a grace to ease our journeys through this life. Help me to discern which fruits I need to work on developing. Grow these fruits in me. Amen.

## **DAY THREE – JESUS**

### **Scripture:**

*“On that day, Jesus went out of the house and sat down by the sea. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat down, and the whole crowd stood along the shore. And he spoke to them at length in parables, saying: ‘A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky ground, where it had little soil. It sprang up at once because the soil was not deep, and when the sun rose it was scorched, and it withered for lack of roots. Some seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it. But some seed fell on rich soil, and produced fruit, a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold. Whoever has ears ought to hear.’ The seed sown on the path is the one who hears the word of the kingdom without understanding it, and the evil one comes and steals away what was sown in his heart. The seed sown on rocky ground is the one who hears the word and receives it at once with joy. But he has no root and lasts only for a time. When some tribulation or persecution comes because of the word, he immediately falls away. The seed sown among thorns is the one who hears the word, but then worldly anxiety and the lure of riches choke the word and it bears no fruit. But the seed sown on rich soil is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold.” ~ Matthew 13:1-9, 19-23*

### **Reflection:**

I can really relate to this parable because in my life as a gardener, I have encountered all of these situations. I have planted seeds only to have birds (or ants!) steal them. I have tried to grow plants in rocky soil only to find out they never grew roots deep enough to thrive. I have battled thistles for the life of my plants for the last thirty years, and often the thistles have won! I've almost given up on garden after garden because of these problems, but the reason I still plant and weed, cultivate and water is because of the deep satisfaction I get from beautiful bountiful plants maturing in good soil.

Sometimes we get to choose what kind of soil we are going to be for hearing the word of God, but more often than not, our circumstances dictate the type of soil we are. Those who struggle to find food and shelter are so focused on their physical needs that they don't have time or energy to care for their spiritual needs. Those who battle physical or mental health problems can find it difficult to grow deep spiritual roots while those with family or employment issues may feel their concerns choking out their spiritual growth. We all battle with weeds or rocky ground from time to time.

What we can do to ensure our faith doesn't wither away during these times of trial is to nurture our spirituality during the times we are in the good soil so that we develop strong, life-sustaining spiritual roots. That way when the weeds start to grow around us, our spiritual plant is strong enough to overtake them, and when our soil becomes rocky, our roots are deep enough to reach the water and nutrients needed to continue to thrive. Then even if the worst should happen and we find ourselves overtaken by birds, we will find we have grown into mature plants with strong branches, healthy and fit

enough to weather the nesting of a whole flock of birds instead of small, weak seeds or sprouts which can be easily devoured.

**Questions for further thought:**

What kind of soil are you in right now? What problems inhibit your spiritual growth? If you are currently in good soil, what are you doing to enhance your spiritual growth?

**Exercise:**

Make a list of the activities you engage in on a regular basis which help build strong spiritual roots. Is your list full or sparse? Are you fully engaged in these activities or do you do them half-heartedly? Do you need to add anything to your list? Do you need to delete or change anything?

**Prayer:** Holy Spirit, I am in \_\_\_\_\_ soil right now. Help me to grow spiritually and sustain me with your life-giving presence. Amen.

## **DAY FOUR: GOD'S WORD**

### **Scripture:**

*“There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit. But one and the same Spirit produces all of these, distributing them individually to each person as he wishes.” ~ 1 Corinthians 12:4-7, 11*

### **Reflection:**

I spent last weekend painting my kitchen and binge-watching “Designated Survivor” between coats. The show is about a man who was never cut out to be president suddenly being thrust into the position because there is no one left. Early in the series, he reflects on his time as the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development and says that he always felt called into public service but in a different direction than the presidency. However, he uses his skills as an urban planner to avoid going to war and draws on his experience as president of a university to negotiate with Congress. While a meeting with a former president whom he idolizes makes him feel wholly inadequate, by the end of that particular episode, he realizes that while he doesn't have the gifts people expect a president to have, he does have his own set of gifts and talents which he can use to perform the job.

As I said, I watched this show while waiting for paint and a particularly big drywall patch to dry. I am skilled at both painting and drywalling because I have practiced these skills a lot over the years. I am not, however, either a gifted drywaller or a passionate painter. My gifts and passions lie in other areas. When I drywall or paint, it is because I have to, not because I want to. I am not the best painter or drywaller in town, but then I don't have to be.

We all have our own gifts and talents because we are all called to different vocations. Sometimes, we are asked to step out of our comfort zones and use our gifts and talents in ways we never imagined. Sometimes we need to acquire a new skill which will never be our gift. Either of these situations can make us uncomfortable, but the good news is that we don't have to be at best at doing anything except being ourselves. We are each a unique and important part of the Body of Christ. We don't have to be like anyone else or do what anyone else is doing. While many situations in life will still make us uncomfortable, we should find comfort in realizing that God only expects me to be the best me I can be and God only expects you to be the best you that you can be. And God finds each of us not just valuable, but irreplaceable.

### **Questions for further thought:**

What are your spiritual gifts? How has the Spirit called you to serve the Body of Christ?

**Exercise:**

Sometimes discerning our spiritual gifts feels like bragging, but it's not. Be honest with yourself. Make a list of your gifts. If you need help discerning your gifts, ask someone close to you to help. Then put this list somewhere you can read it every day.

**Prayer:**

Holy Spirit, you have given me my own unique set of gifts and talents. Help me to use those gifts to help my family, my community, and my world. Amen.

## **DAY FIVE: GOD'S PEOPLE**

### **Scripture:**

*“When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a scholar of the law, tested him by asking, ‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ He said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.’”*  
~ Matthew 22:34-40

### **Reflection:**

What a great scripture for Friday of Safari – God’s People! What a challenging scripture for any day of the week! It’s not that it’s hard to love God as much as we are able. I think most of us have that down. It’s the second part of that commandment that we all struggle with - loving our neighbor as ourselves. It’s so evident that we struggle with it that I don’t need to spend time pointing out the evidence that we do. Instead, let’s talk about how we come to love our neighbor’s as ourselves.

Recently I flew cross-country. I love flying! However, I am terribly afraid of heights in other situations like driving in the mountains or crossing high bridges. As I flew over the Rockies, I looked down on them and truly appreciated the beauty of their snow-capped peaks. At the same time, the ironic thought occurred to me that I would not want to be down on top of one of those peaks because it would be too high for me and make me very uncomfortable. I am still scarred by a somewhat terrifying trip I made up Pike’s Peak as a child. My appreciation of the Rocky Mountains depends entirely upon my perspective of them.

The problem we have with loving our neighbors as ourselves isn’t that we aren’t trying hard enough. It’s that our perspective gets in the way just like my fear of heights can get in the way of my appreciation of the Rockies. We look at others through our own eyes which means we often end up judging people based upon their value to us. In order to love our neighbors as ourselves, we need to look at others from a different perspective. From God’s perspective. God sees each of us as a beloved child, as someone of immense value and worth, as someone who deserves unconditional love. It’s this perspective – trying to see others as God sees them – that makes the second part of this commandment possible, and while we can’t fully view others through God’s eyes, trying to see them as God sees them can suddenly make our neighbors much more lovable.

### **Questions for further thought:**

Whom do you have trouble loving? Think about the reasons you have trouble loving this person. How do you think God sees their flaws? Does God love them more or less for their imperfections?

**Exercise:**

Focus on one person you have trouble loving. Commit to pray for this person for the next month. Don't pray for them to change. Instead pray for God to help them through whatever struggles they may have. At the end of the month ask yourself if this person seems more lovable to you. Then ask yourself who changed.

**Prayer:**

Holy Spirit, you give me unconditional love not despite my imperfections but because of them. Give me the grace to love others as I love myself. Amen.