

**Fifth Sunday of Easter – Year B
(May 14, 2006)**

God the Gardener

Our readings these Sundays have been giving us some striking images of our relationship to Jesus and to God the Father as well as to one another. Last week we heard Jesus say he is the Good Shepherd and he cares for us as a shepherd cares for his flock. He is even willing to risk his life, leaving the ninety-nine to go and search for the one lost sheep that has strayed away because without that one the flock is not whole. As I said last week, this is an image of salvation. Jesus has come to put back together what has been divided, split apart, sundered by sin so that as he says there will be one flock and one shepherd, and as he prays at the Last Supper, “That they be one, Father, as you are in me and I am in you, that they all may be one in us.”

Today he gives us a metaphor that comes from gardening, “I am the vine, you are the branches.” It’s another image of community. Just as the flock is one under the care of the shepherd, we continue to be one just as long as we are connected with Jesus as the branches are to the vine. Indeed the branches take their life from the vine. Cut off they would wither and die.

But now Jesus adds still another image and that is God as the gardener. It’s as though God is out in the garden with his pruning shears and God goes along inspecting each of the branches to see how they are doing. And here it gets a little ominous, maybe a little frightening because if God sees that a branch is not bearing fruit the branch feels the cutting shears. God cuts it off. Conversely if the branch is bearing fruit, well, it will have to suffer a little, too, because God takes those same shears and trims it back. Now I’m sure you all have seen trees and bushes that have been trimmed. They don’t look too good. They seem a little bare, but we know that the trimming which might not look good actually is a help so that the next year the branches will bear even more fruit. In the same way we can experience pain and struggle in our lives, but with the proper attitude that pain and struggle can become the effect of God’s pruning shears. Accepting it, living with it, recognizing it for its value to purify us, to prune us, as it

were, can not only make pain and struggle bearable, it can make them a source of great spiritual fruit. Our spiritual branches can bud and blossom and bring much beauty into our lives and into the world we live in.

And that, I think, brings us to what I consider a most important point in what Jesus is saying. He is, I think, in a rather poetic way, talking about connections, how he is connected to each one of us as a vine is to its branches. But that in turn means that we are all connected in some way to one another since we are all part of the same vine. This is saying pretty much the same thing Paul would say when he spoke of the Church as the Body of Christ. It's a wonderful thing to think about. We are all connected.

Have you ever seen a play or film called *Six Degrees of Separation*? In it the main character has this wonderful idea about how we are all connected. She expresses it this way:

"I read somewhere that everybody on this planet is separated by only six degrees of separation. Between us and everybody else on this planet – the President of the United States, a gondolier in Venice. Fill in the names. I find that tremendously comforting that we're so close. Because you have to find the right six people to make the connection. It's not just big names, It's anyone. A native in a rain forest. A Tierra del Fuegan. An Eskimo. I am bound on this planet by a trail of six people. . . . Now every person is a new door, opening up into other worlds. Six degrees of separation between me and everyone else."

Well, I don't know how scientific that is, but it's at least poetically true, isn't it? And it certainly is spiritually true. It's what Jesus was praying about when he says "That they may be one." It's what Paul was talking about when he says, "We are the Body of Christ." And whatever one member of the Body does for good or for ill will affect every other member of the Body. It's a consoling thing to think but it's also challenging because it tells us how we are to relate to all these other members of the Body. As Paul says, "Just as no one member of the body can say to another, I have no need of you, so can no one of us say to another, I have no need of you." And that applies not just to those we like and who like us, but to those we might not like, who are different from us in any way, by race or ethnic background, political persuasion, sexual orientation, or any of those other things that can keep us apart. Can you imagine what this world would be like if we all at least tried to do that? We would be part of the great

enterprise that Jesus began two thousand years ago, the salvation of the world, bringing us all into one great big community where people could live together in peace and harmony.

It all begins right here, of course, as we share the one bread and the one cup that make us all the one Body of Christ. May we all take what we receive here and bring it out of these doors and into our daily lives, for our own sake and for the good of the world we live in.