

**“Have Regard for This Vine”**  
**Psalm 80:1-2, 8-19; Hebrews 11:29-12:2**

**Hebrews 11:29-12:2**

<sup>29</sup>By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned.

<sup>30</sup>By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days.

<sup>31</sup>By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

<sup>32</sup>And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—

<sup>33</sup>who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, <sup>34</sup>quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

<sup>35</sup>Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection.

<sup>36</sup>Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment.

<sup>37</sup>They were stoned to death, ~~they were sawn in two~~, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— <sup>38</sup>of whom the world was not worthy.

They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

<sup>39</sup>Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, <sup>40</sup>since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

<sup>12:1</sup>Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, <sup>2</sup>looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

### **Psalm 80:1-2, 8-19**

<sup>1</sup>Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,  
    you who lead Joseph like a flock!  
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim,  
    shine forth <sup>2</sup>before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.  
Stir up your might,  
    and come to save us!

<sup>8</sup>You brought a vine out of Egypt;  
    you drove out the nations and planted it.

<sup>9</sup>You cleared the ground for it;  
    it took deep root and filled the land.

<sup>10</sup>The mountains were covered with its shade,  
    the mighty cedars with its branches;

<sup>11</sup>it sent out its branches to the sea,  
    and its shoots to the River.

<sup>12</sup>Why then have you broken down its walls,  
    so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?

<sup>13</sup>The boar from the forest ravages it,  
    and all that move in the field feed on it.

<sup>14</sup>Turn again, O God of hosts; look down from heaven, and see;  
have regard for this vine,<sup>15</sup>the stock that your right hand planted.

<sup>16</sup>They have burned it with fire, they have cut it down;  
may they perish at the rebuke of your countenance.

<sup>17</sup>But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand,  
the one whom you made strong for yourself.

<sup>18</sup>Then we will never turn back from you;  
give us life, and we will call on your name.

<sup>19</sup>Restore us, O LORD God of hosts;  
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

### The Sermon

We used to live on the Atlantic coast, a few miles from the ocean and just a few blocks from the Intercoastal Waterway.

When we moved from the church manse, which was just five blocks from the beach, into a home of our own a few miles inland, it was the first time we were solely responsible for the upkeep of a whole property. I think we'd been there for about three months before it dawned on me that nobody else was coming to mow the lawn.

Part of that property included a lovely but rustic back yard, and there was a little boxed in area where the previous owners had had a little garden. So, for the first time in my life, I decided I would try my hand at a vegetable garden.

Well, it's sand. One of my plantings was a habanero plant, and I figured that by late summer I'd be adding some fire to chilis and soups and whatever else wouldn't get me kicked out of the house. In the event, the

result of one full summer of watering, nurturing, tending, weeding and hoping was a yield of exactly one tiny habanero pepper. I put it in a crock pot of chili, and you couldn't even tell it was there.

I also produced a handful of green bell peppers that were just big enough for a Barbie doll cookout. I grew an eggplant—one—that looked like a doorknob, and a cucumber about the size of a sausage link. This was not rich soil.

One of our church members once handed me some gorgeous, fresh, dark green leaves of bok choy that he had grown in his garden, and he lived closer to the beach than we did. I asked him what in the world he did to grow it so beautifully. He shrugged his shoulders—“nothing; just planted it and watered it.” Two minutes later, in conversation with somebody else who was present, the same guy casually mentioned “I had five tons of topsoil brought in.”

Oh, I see. So, you meant that other than importing five tons of arable land, you “didn’t do anything special” to grow bok choy two blocks from the beach.

Anyway, back in my garden, and indeed the whole, sizeable yard, which did *not* have the benefit of wholesale topographical reconstruction, what we had was sand—stubborn, lifeless sand that seemed to leak like a sieve all the way down to the water table.

There was just enough soil in it to allow a few things to grow a little, and one thing, I noticed, that grew a lot.

It only took a minute of paying close attention to see a weed in the form of a vine. You might notice one vine in the crabgrass, and then notice that it was all over the crabgrass, and then notice that it was all over and under the lawn, everywhere.

You could dig around it, and pull it and pull it and pull it, but you got the sense that it was thousands of miles long, interwoven like a ball of yarn or the inside of a golf ball, and you could imagine it extending to the center of the earth.

I always felt like if you could get a good enough grip on it and just start pulling, you'd risk unraveling the entire lawn and maybe the surrounding acreage, like a sweater when you pull on a loose string.

That vine seemed to be binding everything together, and much as I might try to get rid of just a little bit of it, there was always more.

"Have regard for this vine," said the people in the Palestinian wilderness—a vulnerable, hunted, haunted people, the Jews: defeated, beaten down, despised, isolated, mocked and constantly imperiled.

Have regard for this vine, O God: you put us here in love, and there are many who would try to rip us from the ground.

We know, O God, that we have disappointed your hopes. We were your pleasant planting that should have been abundantly fruitful, but have so often yielded only bitter, sour grapes.

You established an order for us where there was enough for all, but it turned out that it was easier to bring *us* out of Pharaoh's land than it was to get Pharaoh's system out of us,<sup>i</sup> and we hoarded resources, and we competed with our neighbors and took advantage of the ones who couldn't keep up.

And now we live in terror of the poverty we invented, so we make sure the poor don't get powerful enough to threaten to take away the surpluses around which we have built our lives.

Restore us, LORD God of hosts;  
 let your face shine, that we may be saved.  
 And remind us, O God, about the great cloud of witnesses,  
 the vine to which, by your mercy alone, we are connected.

Turn again, look down from heaven, and see;  
 have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand planted.

The Hebrew could also be translated:

Look down from heaven;  
*perceive* this land, *behold* it, *consider* it;<sup>ii</sup>  
 and *visit* this vine; *take* or *take care of* this vine.<sup>iii</sup>

Vines are persistent. You can try to control them, but they grow and spread because that's what they were created to do.

You can't always tell where they begin or end.

They can hold together patches of earth—pieces of the world—that would otherwise crumble.

They don't stay in their lane, because they seem to know instinctively, as if it were planted deep in their DNA, that all the lanes are God's lanes. Friedrich Schleiermacher in the early 1800s called it the “feeling of absolute dependence” at our core, a kernel of awareness that each of us has an absolute dependence on something infinitely greater and truer and more real than ourselves—specifically, the God who made and redeemed and who loves and sustains us.

Those who remain connected to God, dependent on God, cognizant of God, who know that God has regard for them and who themselves have regard for all of God's people and all God's creation, those who are part

of the endless vine, are authorized to reach into all the world with love, embracing it deeply, surrounding it, encompassing it, the same way that God's love is a vine that runs through your life, surrounding you, enveloping you, nourishing you.

The only person who can tell the vine of God's love in your life to "stay in its lane" is you. Which doesn't usually work for very long, thank God.

But the blaring voices of the contempt and cynicism and heartlessness of our time can sometimes threaten to drown out the memories, and the dreams, and the mission of the People of God.

And when the seed of the word of God falls on hardened path or rocky ground or among thorns,<sup>iv</sup>

or when the fruits of what we thought would be our seasons of growing and flourishing come out small and stunted and don't seem to have much effect,

I remember the vine to which we are connected:

the prophets through whom God conquered kingdoms and administered justice,

the political prisoner witnesses to God's love who never sold out, even when it could have been their get-out-of-jail-free card,

the saints of whom the world was not even worthy who suffered the most appalling and abominable degradations for the sake of good news to the poor, and release for the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free.<sup>v</sup>

I remember the vine that connects me to God and humanity and all

creation.

Vedran Smajlović was the cellist who went out into the wreckage during the siege of Sarajevo in the early 90s, where Bosnian Serb nationalists had sent mortar fire into a crowd of people lined up for bread, and where snipers continually tormented the city and had no qualms about targeting hospitals, schools or libraries.

Smajlović, a member of the Sarajevo Philharmonic Orchestra, would put on his coat and tails and set up his cello and music stand, insistently giving music to the lamentation of the city and uncompromisingly imposing beauty into what others were trying their worst to turn into hell.

We don't know the name of the Chinese dissident in Tiananmen Square in 1989 who stood in front of one of the tanks that the government had sent in to crush the students who were demanding greater democracy. When the tank would try to steer around him, he would move so that he was still in front of it, daring it to run him over before the world's cameras.

Nor will we probably ever know the name of the tank driver who could have crushed that demonstrator into the pavement, but never did, and probably suffered for it at the hands of a regime whose patience eventually ran out along with its conscience and its humanity.

In both the vulnerability of the dissident and the restraint of the tank driver with immense power to destroy at his or her disposal, we see what we can be, and what we can do with the part of the vine that runs through our lives.

There is an Ethiopian priest whose church was built by missionaries who brought Christianity to Ethiopia in the late fifth century. It's carved into

a cliffside above an 820-foot drop and can only be reached by a climb that includes narrow ledges and at least one 32-foot section of “sheer vertical cliff” that has to be scaled without shoes or a rope. He walks two hours in the early morning just to get to the foot of the cliff to start the climb, and by all indications he loves what he does.<sup>vi</sup>

We may question the wisdom or sanity or value of that, noting particularly that going to that church is not only a voluntary activity but a solitary one: it’s not like there are families coming for services on Sunday morning. The priest studies and prays alone. Why bother?

But he and thousands of other women and men like him carry out the monastic charge every day, all over the world, in all kinds of circumstances, and you and I can know that somewhere—up high mountains, in ancient ruins, alone or in community, in every nation, there are dedicated people who are praying to God, for us and on our behalf, regularly, around the clock.

Martin Luther King delivered a sermon in Atlanta on February 4, 1968, in which he said:

Jesus gave us a new norm of greatness. If you want to be important, wonderful. If you want to be recognized, wonderful. If you want to be great, wonderful.

But recognize that [the one] who is greatest among you shall be your servant. That’s your new definition of greatness. [And] it means that everybody can be great. Because everybody can serve.

You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. You don’t have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don’t have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don’t have to know Einstein’s theory of relativity to serve. You don’t have to

know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve.

You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.  
And you can be that servant.<sup>vii</sup>

There's a program in Charlotte called Samaritan's Feet, founded by a guy from Nigeria named Manny Ohonme. They give shoes to poor kids and wash their feet while they're doing it.<sup>viii</sup>

Cody Zeller is a 7-foot-tall basketball player from Indiana who plays for the Charlotte Hornets. He wears a size 16 shoe and said, "I can't even imagine if you're a kid and you wear size 16—Where does a parent find those shoes? Even if you can afford them, they're hard to find."<sup>ix</sup> So he donated 200 pairs of size 16 shoes.

Manny Ohonme said, "It's pretty amazing. You've got a volunteer, someone like Cody Zeller on one side and me on the other side, the kids are sitting right in front of us. We ask what their names are and what their dreams are. This is while we are washing their feet. We are asking them, how do you want to change the world? We put on these new shoes and say, now use these shoes to go change the world."<sup>x</sup>

Mother Maria Skobtsova wrote,

"The eyes of love will perhaps be able to see how Christ himself departs, quietly and invisibly, from the sanctuary [at the end of the worship service].

The singing [will] resound, [clouds] of incense will arise, the faithful will be overcome by [the] beauty of the services.

But Christ will go out onto the church steps and mingle with the crowd: the poor, the lepers, the desperate, the embittered, the holy fools.

Christ will go out into the streets, the prisons, the low haunts and dives.  
Again and again.”<sup>xi</sup>

In a long poem called “Instructions To Painters & Poets” by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, one of the beat poets from the mid-20th century, he wrote:

“I asked a hundred painters and a hundred poets  
how to paint sunlight  
on the face of life...  
[It] seems to me  
all you have to do  
is conceive of the whole world  
and all humanity  
as a kind of art work...  
an art project of the [God] of light...

[Paint] yourself  
in your true colors  
in primary colors  
as you see them  
(without whitewash)...

And don’t forget to paint  
all those who lived their lives  
as bearers of light...

And when you’ve finished your painting  
stand back astonished....”<sup>xii</sup>

“You brought a vine out of Egypt;  
you drove out the nations and planted it.  
You cleared the ground for it;

it took deep root and filled the land” (Psalm 80:8-11).

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God” (from Hebrews 12:1-2).

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<sup>i</sup> Dr. Ryan Bonfiglio at Columbia Seminary/FPC-Atlanta did not claim this as his original thought, but without him it would not have come to me.

<sup>ii</sup> [https://biblehub.com/hebrew/ureeh\\_7200.htm](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/ureeh_7200.htm)

<sup>iii</sup> [https://biblehub.com/hebrew/ufekod\\_6485.htm](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/ufekod_6485.htm)

<sup>iv</sup> Matthew 13:17-23

<sup>v</sup> Luke 4:18 from Isaiah 61:1 and 58:6

<sup>vi</sup> Ruth Gledhill, “Every day, this priest climbs a sheer cliff to get to church” (The Tablet, February 20, 2018, <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/8587/every-day-this-priest-climbs-a-sheer-cliff-to-get-to-church>)

<sup>vii</sup> “Drum Major Instinct,” sermon, Atlanta, February 4, 1968

<sup>viii</sup> <https://www.samaritansfeet.org/about-us/>

<sup>ix</sup> Maureen O’Boyle, “Charlotte Hornet Cody Zeller knows there are big shoes to fill out there, makes major donation to Samaritan’s Feet” (Updated June 12 at 6:31 PM,

<https://www.wbtv.com/2019/06/12/charlotte-hornet-cody-zeller-knows-there-are-big-shoes-fill-out-there-makes-major-donation-samaritans-feet/>)

<sup>x</sup> O’Boyle, “Charlotte Hornet Cody Zeller”

<sup>xi</sup> Maria Skobtsova (Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, translators), *Mother Maria Skobtsova: Essential Writings* (Orbis Books, 2003)

<sup>xii</sup> Lawrence Ferlinghetti, “Instructions To Painters & Poets” in Judith Valente and Charles Reynard, eds., *Twenty Poems to Nourish Your Soul* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2016), 197-201