

**Easter 5B  
John 15: 1-8  
May 10, 2009**

**This has been such an uplifting and inspiring time the past few days, for the MSU community, and especially for Episcopalians. We were blessed for a few days with the presence among us of a living saint, the Most Reverend Desmond Tutu, archbishop emeritus of Cape Town, South Africa, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, and tireless worker for justice and equity and life and hope for all people.**

**He was here, Thursday morning, in our undercroft, meeting with the Canterbury MSU students. He was in the Breslin Center Friday afternoon, addressing the graduating class at convocation. And wherever he went, he brought his eccentric sense of humor, his twinkling, mischievous smile, and his message of passionate commitment to the dream of God. The dream of a world that is more compassionate, more equitable, a world that is filled with God's beauty and God's love, a world that might possibly be attainable, if we participate in creating it.**

**Tutu described his vision of God – of a God who has purposely created an imperfect world, specifically so that we ourselves might discover how necessary and useful we are in God's project of setting the world to rights. Tutu said, "God is a God who waits on us to become God's fellow workers and collaborators. When someone is hungry," he told the crowd at Breslin, "God wants to feed that person, but that is not usually by floating-down-from-heaven-hamburgers. It's because you and you and you and you have decided, 'Yes, God, I want to be your collaborator, your fellow worker, your partner.'"**

**God wants us to be intimately involved in God's project of setting the world to rights. Amazing. We are here for a purpose, a holy purpose. Not just to live out our days working and cooking and watching television and playing on Facebook, but to live for a purpose, for God's purpose. To share in a dream. God's dream.**

**It is the same vision Jesus extends to his friends in today's gospel lesson. This long section from John's gospel falls right between the Last Supper and the moment when Jesus leaves the upper room with his friends to go to the garden of Gethsemane, where he will be arrested and taken away to be condemned and killed. But in between those two events, the Last Supper, and his arrest, Jesus makes this long speech to his friends. You might almost call it his commencement address. He tells them what they need to know to about him, what they need to know about his Father, and what they need to know about themselves as they go forward from that moment.**

**The section we read this morning is but a brief interlude in this long speech Jesus makes on the last night of his life. But it touches on the key elements of our calling, and of the source of that calling, and of the very source of our life.**

**In it, Jesus uses another one of those great "I AM" metaphors. Last week, he said, "I AM the Good Shepherd." Remember from last week, that "I AM" is the name of God of Hebrew Scripture, the name of Jesus' own Father. So every time Jesus says "I AM" about himself, he is also talking about God the Father – what Jesus is like and what God is like. And now Jesus says "I AM the True Vine." He gives us this image of himself as a thick, twisting trunk of a grapevine, thrusting up from the soil, reaching for the sun and the rain, and bursting forth with enormous clusters of juicy grapes.**

**"I am the vine and you are the branches," he tells his friends, he tells us this morning. And don't think he's speaking to us as individuals. What is a grapevine with only one sorry branch? He is speaking to us collectively. All of us together. This community, All Saints Episcopal Church, all of us gathered here today. We are branches on the vine, twining in and out amongst one another, drawing our life from deep connection with Christ, grafted into his passionate love for the world, created for the purpose of bearing his fruit.**

**Because that's what Jesus is calling us to do, much as Bishop Tutu sees God calling us into a collaborative working arrangement. It's for the same purpose. To bear fruit. HE is the vine. WE are the branches. We have been called to put forth those clusters of ripe, juicy grapes.**

**But here are some things to notice about this fruit-bearing business. First of all, it's not about OUR fruit. It's not about becoming successful in this world, or achieving notice or honor or reward for our accomplishments. It's not about becoming wealthy. It's not about having perfect children, or being a perfect parent. It's about bearing GOD's fruit. Fruit to sustain God's world. Fruit to bring life and nourishment where there is death and starvation. Not our fruit. God's fruit.**

**Look at the fruit Bishop Tutu has brought to life in his own way--fruits of peace and reconciliation, a new nation able to move beyond its tortured past. He could have kept his head down. He could have stayed out of trouble. He could have focused only on his life, his family, his career. He took a different course. He chose to bear fruit.**

**Secondly, that fruit bearing only happens if we abide in Christ. None of this happens by our own will, or through our own efforts. It is the fruit of deep prayer, of daily commitment to reading and meditating on God's word, of sharing our burdens and joys with one another in Christian love. In Eugene Peterson's translation of the Scriptures, called "The Message," Jesus puts it this way. "I am the Vine, you are the branches. When you're joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant. Separated, you can't produce a thing."**

**You can tell when you meet Bishop Tutu, even just to see him across a crowded room, that his whole life force springs out of this intimate connection to God. This is a man who has prayed so much and so long, who has so internalized the boundless compassion and joy of Holy Scripture, that he can preach the gospel, can BE the gospel, in all sorts of situations.**

**Jim Wallis of Sojourners tells about being with Tutu one time when the apartheid government in South Africa had cancelled a political rally. So Tutu invited everyone to the cathedral for church. The church was packed, and hundreds of police surrounded it, hoping for some incident to flare up and give them an excuse to shut the service down.**

**They lined the walls of the cathedral, hoping to intimidate the archbishop and the worshippers. Instead, when Tutu got up to preach, he said, "This system of apartheid cannot endure because it is evil." Then he pointed his finger at the police and said, "You are powerful. You are very powerful, but you are not gods and I serve a God who cannot be mocked. So, since you've already lost, I invite you today to come and join the winning side!" And the congregation began singing and shouting and dancing in the church. The police moved back, because they didn't expect dancing worshipers. That kind of courage, that kind of faith that Tutu showed that day, comes from being completely grounded in God, from abiding in God.**

**Finally, if we are to bear fruit, we must be willing to be pruned. As a community of faith, we must be willing to be pruned of those activities and ideas that may please us enormously, but which do not make us fruitful. And I ask all of us gathered here today ... are we ready for that sort of pruning? And as individuals, we must be willing to be pruned of any prejudice or self-centeredness, any common whininess or secret resentments, which keep us from bearing God's own good fruit of love. And I ask each one of us gathered here today ... are you yourself ready for that sort of pruning?**

**We must be willing to know that we are not as THE vine. I am not THE vine. You are not THE vine. All Saints is not THE vine. The Episcopal Church is not THE vine. *Christ* is the vine, and we are just small branches on a great and wonderful vine, every one of us necessary, every one of us needful, not one of us dispensable, in God's great project of redemption.**

**Bishop Tutu put it like this in his speech. He said, "God says hey, I too have a dream. I have a dream that my children will know that they are members of one family. That they are made for togetherness. No outsiders. All, all are insiders. Black, white, rich, poor, clever, not so clever, lesbian, gay ... so-called straight. All, all to be held in an embrace that will not allow anyone to stand outside that embrace. All. All.**

**“All belong in this family and if we believe in this, how could we ever again spend the obscene amount that we spend on arms and weapons of destruction when we know that a tiny fraction would enable children everywhere in the world to have clean water to drink, enough food to eat, a good education, a secure home.**

**“And God says please, please, please I ask you, will you help me realize my dream, will you be my fellow worker? Please please can you help me make this world a little more compassionate, a little more gentle, a little more caring? Will you help me eradicate disease, poverty, ignorance, will you, will you, will you?”**