

April 28, 2024
The Fifth Sunday in Easter
St. Stephen's, Catlett
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Acts 8:26-40
Psalm 22:24-30
1 John 4:7-21
John 15:1-8

There was a time when iconoclasts were pretty popular, if a bit controversial. The idea started way back in the early Eastern (now Orthodox) Church, where icons – sacred images of saints – were said to be graven images, and should be smashed (Greek *klastes*). It picked up speed in the Reformation when the Calvinists said that all artwork, especially statues, should be destroyed. Nowadays, of course, we see iconoclasts tearing down statues of Confederate soldiers and anyone else they find objectionable. But beyond its literal meaning, an iconoclast can be anyone who challenges social and religious norms.

Iconoclasts are important to us today when they fulfill a prophetic role in our national, local, and religious communities by identifying images and beliefs that are no longer helpful to us and that should be re-examined, if not completely discarded. The key word here is images, which are copies of the real thing. Sometimes it's difficult for us to tell the difference between an image and the reality it represents. We may occasionally find ourselves worshipping images – iconic values, if you will – that have become pretty far removed from the reality we think they represent.

In the opening words of today's Gospel Jesus identifies Himself as the "true vine," which is as real as it gets. We live only because we are part of that true vine. During the course of our lives, however, we may develop images either of the vine or of the world around us that are simply not realistic. Unchecked, they lead to false worship and even idolatry when the images themselves replace the reality they were supposed to point toward: when our idea of God is so far removed from God's self-revelation in Scripture and in Jesus Christ. The ability to tell the difference between the true vine and some of the images we have picked up along the way will lead us away from mere existence and into the abundant life Jesus promises us.

Our readings today show us two ways of identifying the difference between image and reality. One comes from the first letter of John, which tells us that if we are not loving one another – that is, constantly doing good things for one another – then we do not know God, and we are not part of the true vine. Whatever it is that's preventing us from showing one another the love of God is a blight that will kill us if it is not removed, even if we see it as an iconic part of our lives. The second path comes from Jesus Himself, Who tells us that as long as we abide in Him on the vine, He will abide in us, and we will bear fruit. If we choose not to abide in Him, then we can do nothing. That is to say, in the midst of endlessly variable icons in our lives, we have one sacred constant, one divine connection that we ought not to sever.

Jesus continues by telling us that if we abide in Him, if we make Him the center of our lives, then His words will abide in us, and we will always know what to continue to hold sacred in our lives and what has become an idol, an encumbrance, that needs to be removed. We can save God some time trouble by monitoring our own spiritual lives and removing the problem areas before God intervenes. And iconoclasts can be very helpful in helping us recognize the icons in our lives that need to be "*klastesed*," smashed.

The question we face today is whether we are venerating authentic icons of the holy or worshipping dumb idols. One way to tell is to let the Creator and Owner of the vineyard speak to our hearts and tell us what needs to stay and what needs to go. That happens more easily when we're actually part of the vine, when we're abiding in the cycles of feast and famine, of strength and weakness, of icons and idols, and never losing sight of who we are at our core, and where we abide.