

We Live in the Energetic Power of God

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St. Martin's Episcopal Church, Williamsburg Virginia

It's breathtaking to take in the images of life and death from this past week:

- Life: the birth of a new princess, a baby-girl, sister to Prince George. She is the newly born daughter of Prince William and Kate, the Duchess of Cambridge, and the fifth great-grandchild of the reigning monarch of the United Kingdom, Queen Elizabeth II, and her husband the Duke of Edinburgh.
- More life: the survival of Pemba, the 15 year old teenager who was rescued after five days of being entombed alive in earthquake rubble.
- More life: Sonies, the five-month-old baby rescued 22 hours after the earthquake.
- Death: over 5,000 people who perished in the same earthquake in Nepal.
- More death: the death of Freddie Gray, and the lives of the six Baltimore police officers that are forever changed because of their alleged part in his death.
- Life: the yearning for life that shouts from the t-shirt of the man of wears it, the words of the t-shirt reading, "We must stop killing each other."

These images of life and death draw us into a public story that goes beyond the limits of our private lives. These births and deaths remind us that each of us, as individuals, is linked to one another, not just by our humanity but by our common

dependency on one another to live ... and let live. This week, we have been reminded that we depend on one another: to be born and to survive. We have been reminded that, even in our dying, we are affected by the actions of one another: whether because our life is cut short because of someone else's action or because our bodies are cared for by others after we die. We depend on one another.

A few weeks ago, at the 9:15 a.m. service our young people who are 13 years of age were publicly prayed for by the whole congregation gathered: we celebrated and prayed for Joshua, Ashton, Victoria, Madison, Mac, Campbell, Matthew [others?]. We call the service Rite-13 because it's the ritual we do when a person is 13 years of age. This ritual marks the start of their journey into adulthood, a journey that will last the rest of their lives. In a way, we do this ritual precisely because of what we have seen this week – that each of us lives in a web of relationships, where we each affect others, and the choices we make have profound consequences on the lives of others, and sometimes on their deaths too. So then, even as we are giving thanks for the lives of our 13 year olds and the way their bodies are awesomely made by the power of God's creation moving through their biological bodies, we are recognizing also that the choices they make can lead to life: literally generating life, through sex. But of course, as church folk, we're not just talking about sexual intercourse. Sex is easy. It's the living after the sex that is complicated with choices. It's the living, outside of the moments of sex, that summons us to consider how we can bear good fruit. Just ask the new princess's Uncle Harry, a veteran of the Afghanistan wars. Just ask the mother of

Freddie Gray. Just ask the rescuer in Nepal who found the 15 year old five days after the earthquake. It's the daily choices we make that remind us that we depend on each other for life and that we have the power to make choices that are life-giving.

As we say in the Rite-13 service, this is an awesome responsibility: the power to make choices that affect others' lives. It's such an awesome responsibility that it would be easy to cave under the pressure, to mentally check-out and willfully forget to consider, before we act, the effects our actions could have on others. Or, we might become paralyzed by the fear of hurting someone else, or ourselves, and fail to act decisively in a moment which needs our decisiveness. So, how can we live in peace, at peace, with this knowledge that what we do affects others?

Jesus addresses this concern in our reading today from the Gospel of John, chapter 15. He tells his disciples that he is the vine; God the Father is the gardener of the vine, and they, the disciples, are the vine branches. They are all connected because of the choice of God for them to be connected. God, the Gardener, tends the Vine, who is Jesus, who in turn gives life to the vine-branches, the disciples. As different as they are – as different as God the Parent is from God the Son, who is different again from the disciples -- they all share a common life because of the choice of God, who chooses to share life with all the others.

And this life is not anxiety-ridden; this life is not destined for failure; this life is not death-defined. Rather, this life is the energetic life of God, the zoay, the kind of energy that has no end but rather bounces vigorously through the universe, sharing its

energy with everything. This is the energetic life that flows through the vine to the vine-branches, to the disciples, and by extension to you and me.

If our lives were defined by our human capabilities alone, we would be anxiety-ridden. If we were determined by our human abilities, we would be destined for failure; we would be death-defined: just look at the evidence of horrors human beings are capable of. But we are not defined by our human capacities: Jesus Christ shares with us the energetic life of God and so redefines what we are capable of. We are capable of great good because of the energetic life of God that God shares with us. This is the hidden meaning behind the words that God prunes the branches of the vine: the Greek word has a double meaning, to cut and to cleanse. In other words, the pruning that the God the Gardener does to the vine-branches not only trims off what doesn't lead to good fruit but also cleanses the vine-branches, making them better able to bear the good fruit. Think of a fungus that invades a vine in your garden: a cleansing cut that trims off the fungus enables the vine that would wither and bear no fruit to be a vine that has a new chance at life, life for itself and the life it gives others through its fruit.

It is no different with us. Jesus says, I am the vine, and you are the branches. By this Jesus means that we have received the cleansing effects of God's powerful energy. It is impossible for us, as branches of the vine, to not be affected by the cleansing power of God. We are connected because we have chosen to believe. So then, Jesus gives us a new understanding of ourselves: no, I am not bound to do the bad thing which I do not

wish to do; rather, I can exercise choice to do the good because I have God's holy energy, the life of the Vine, in me. You have God's holy energy, the life of the Vine, in you.

Every day presents an opportunity to act in ways that bless and do not curse. Every day presents the chance to act like the vine-branch that is blessed to share life with the world. But we're not puppets; we're not robots, as if we're pre-programmed to do good. We have choice to do good or bad, and sometimes we find ourselves caught in circumstances where the choices are not between good and bad: sometimes our choices are between bad and worse. It's fairly easy to choose between good and bad. It's harder to choose between my action that will cause harm and my action that will cause worse harm: this is the journey of adulthood – to make these choices, not being depressed by cynicism and despair, but uplifted with the confidence that it is the holy energy of God working through us that will bring forth life despite the harm that, sometimes, seems far more apparent to our eyes.

Jesus says, you are the vine-branches: as vine-branches you have life. Believe in the life you carry; challenge yourself to grow, using the power of God's energy to fuel your growth; allow yourself to be shaped by the cleansing-cuts of God's pruning, so that you may bear good fruit. Believe, grow, live for the good. Amen.