

IT'S NOT WHO YOU KNOW; BUT WHO KNOWS YOU

I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing...My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. Jn 15:5,8

We all know the old expression that "it's not what you know, it's who you know;" that to get ahead in life you need the right connections. We Armenians often complain that we never have had the right connections, like the Jews let's say; to help win our wars and stay on top of the world stage. As the first Christian nation, however, we've had the right connections from the beginning, perhaps our problem is we keep forgetting who we really are. In the gospel reading for the Blessing of Grapes, Jesus reminds us that it's not what you know or even who you know that matters, it's who knows you. Jesus knows us and knows us intimately, like He is the vine and we are the branches. He abides in us, and we in him.

"Abide" is such a great, old word. It conveys a sense of timeless commitment. It says that we not only live in the Lord, but we have a long-term, iron-clad lease. As a people, as a church, our lease with Christ spans 1700+ years and endures to eternity. Jesus is not the flavor of the month. He's been with us from the beginning and is here to stay. And we are bound together so tightly, that at times it became hard to tell vine from branch. Armenian historian Yeghishe, back in the 5th century, wrote that Christianity had become for Armenians "as the color of the skin and not like a garment." And though secularism has affected us as everyone, still wherever Armenians have been dispersed, they held onto their Bibles and relics and built altars to God. Even the cataclysm of Genocide could not separate the Armenian branch from the true vine. We are indeed bound very tightly to Our Lord.

Most of us admire that commitment and connection to Christ, and it's where we want to be today, but life seems so much more distracting and faith seems so much harder to come by today. How do we stay connected to our first love? The first step is in realizing that wherever we are, God is already there—especially whenever we are together as a church, God is there. It doesn't matter if you are good or bad (we prefer good), whether you came from the beginning or at the end (we prefer the beginning), whether you love the priest or hate him (we prefer love). Wherever you are coming from, gathering near Christ is the only way to become Christ-like.

German Mystic Meister Eckhart put it this way: he said a plum brings forth plums not by an act of will but because it is its nature to do so. In the same way all of us—Armenian and non-Armenians alike—who come together in worship and fellowship at St. Hagop, start to produce fruit naturally. Because gathering around Christ, partaking of Christ, allowing the being of Christ to flow unimpeded into all our branches—begins to produce Christ-like fruit in us: trust, compassion, kindness, mercy, patience, wisdom and love. That's the fruit which made this church beautiful, not just on the outside, but in the inside, in the hearts and bones of its people.

So our connection with Christ can never be like a passing acquaintance. He is the vine, we are the branches, and who can exactly tell where the vine stops and the branches begin. It's this closeness that bears fruit. And today's blessing of the grapes is a tangible reminder of the fruit we bear. It's as if God is saying, "See these grapes which I miraculously raise up from seed every year, you Christians are to be fruitful like this. Not striving, anxious, and competitive but simply trusting of God to grow us as he would see fit—and by this—helping others grow in the same way.

It is not all on us; that is the beauty of being a branch. Over time we draw health and vigor from the vine, from Christ. With every prayer you say in the morning and evening, every successive Badarak, every yearly Blessing of the Grapes, the fruits of grace and Christian sanctity swell within us, until they ripen into a glorious offering to God. And so let us pray: I trust in you, Lord. Show me your ways. Abide in me. Nourish me. Make me fruitful in your service, a fruitful offering like your Son, for the life of the entire world. Now and always, amen.