

Sermon at the Eucharist of the Episcopal Diocese of Taiwan: Bishop Robert Fitzpatrick Based on John 15:1-11

Aloha.

I deeply appreciate the invitation from Bishop Chang to be the guest preacher at this opening Eucharist of your Convention – a very important Convention. It highlights again the historic relationship between the Diocese of Taiwan with the Diocese of Hawaii. We are truly 'ohana i loko o Kristo – family in Christ. Again, Bishop Chang, mahalo – thank you.

As you gather to do the “business” of the Church and to elect your next bishop, the lesson from John’s Gospel is most appropriate to help to guide you through the days ahead.

John 15:1-11 is part of the final teaching of Jesus to his disciples on the night of his arrest called the “Farewell Discourse.” This long speech covers chapters 13–17 and includes the foot-washing, predictions of betrayal and denial, the promise of the Holy Spirit, and Jesus’s High Priestly Prayer in chapter 17.

In chapter 14, Jesus has just told the disciples of the coming crisis. Jesus has comforted the disciples about his departure, promised the Holy Spirit, and spoken of his relationship with the Father. Amid impending doom, Jesus promises peace: “Peace I leave with you. My peace I give you. I give to you not as the world gives. Don’t be troubled or afraid.”

We have just heard the lesson from John 15:1-11. In some ways this is the spiritual core for us as disciples of Christ Jesus. The image of the vine reminds us that our identity and calling as disciples are rooted in our relationship with Jesus. Without Jesus we can do nothing.

Our relation to God – to our creator and our source of life – is through our relation to Jesus: “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, then you will produce much fruit. Without me, you can’t do anything.”

I have only been around a vineyard once in my life. In 1976, I was a high school exchange student in Portugal. My host family took me on a visit to their retired grandfather’s quinta – small estate – outside of Lisbon. It was a grand old house surrounded by a vineyard. Everyone was expected to help in the vineyard. I had absolutely no idea what to do as a 17-year-old American. It was a very dry and hot summer. So, I was put to work hauling water and the dead branches that others had pruned. An old man with a flowing white mustache was the vineyard keeper. He was clearly in charge. Even the owner of the estate took orders from the vineyard keeper. I didn’t always understand what was being said, but every direction was clear: everything was about the healthy vines and producing good grapes – and, therefore, good wine. The goal was the fruit – the result.

When we are called the “branches” of the vine, the whole point of the story is to get to the fruit of our lives. How do we live? Jesus makes it explicit in verse 16: “You didn’t choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you could go and produce fruit and so that your fruit could last.”

In the passages that follow, the fruit is clearly love.

We are told to keep God's commandments, but we're only given one commandment. In John 13:34-35, Jesus gives the "new commandment": "I give you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other."

Jesus makes this further clear in 15:12-14: "This is my commandment: love each other just as I have loved you. No one has greater love than to give up one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I don't call you servants any longer, because servants don't know what their master is doing."

You are not electing a Bishop to be the vineyard keeper. God already has that position. You are electing one to haul water and clear away the dead branches in God's vineyard. One who can help nurture the branches to bear good fruit. You are calling one to show us how to love each other.

During the ordination service for a new bishop, the ordinand has to make promises. Two of the promises are about helping God's people to show the love from Christ:

As a chief priest and pastor, will you encourage and support all baptized people in their gifts and ministries, nourish them from the riches of God's grace, pray for them without ceasing, and celebrate with them the sacraments of our redemption?

And

Will you be merciful to all, show compassion to the poor and strangers, and defend those who have no helper?

These are promises to nurture love inside and outside the Church.

And then during the prayer of consecration, the Presiding Bishop prays over the new Bishop:

To you, O Father, all hearts are open; fill, we pray, the heart of this your servant whom you have chosen to be a bishop in your Church, with such love of you and of all the people, that *the new bishop* may feed and tend the flock of Christ, and exercise without reproach the high priesthood to which you have called *the new bishop*, serving before you day and night in the ministry of reconciliation, declaring pardon in your Name, offering the holy gifts, and wisely overseeing the life and work of the Church. In all things may *the new bishop* present before you the acceptable offering of a pure, and gentle, and holy life; through Jesus Christ your Son, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and power and glory in the Church, now and for ever.

Our witness to the world is our mission. We are the love of God in a world of conflict and anger. We are obedient to God – we show our fruit – in how we live, in how we treat one another, in how we welcome others. We call others into the vineyard by the love we share.

As you gather seeking God's will as to who will be your bishop, please remember that you are not hiring a C.E.O. of a corporation or electing someone to a political office. There is no place for a bishop who is a "king" or "queen." We already have a Savior and Lord – the Prince of Peace. In calling a bishop, you are calling one who can help you – congregation, clergy, lay people – share the love of God with hurt people in a broken world. One who can show what it means to be a servant leader.

Jesus teaches: "My Father is glorified when you produce much fruit and, in this way, prove that you are my disciples."

I am confident that you will call a bishop who can help you produce much good fruit and continue to prove that you are Christ's disciples.

Let us pray.

Almighty God, giver of every good gift: Look graciously on this Convention of the Diocese of Taiwan, and so guide the minds of those who shall choose a bishop for this Diocese, that they may receive a faithful pastor, who will nurture and encourage your people to bring much good fruit into the world that many will come to know and love you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*