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## *Give Yourself Away*

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Lauren Holder  
The Fifth Sunday of Easter – Year B**

When I was a kid, we had a trampoline. Back then, trampolines were not circular with a silly net surrounding them (do those nets really make a trampoline any safer?). Instead, our trampoline was a rectangle. It was our favorite place to hang out.

Our trampoline was tucked on the far side of the backyard where no parents could watch us from the kitchen windows. And because the trampoline was at the end of our property line, it was surrounded on three sides by wood fencing.

You know the kind: where the boards are all placed one after the other in vertical position to provide maximum privacy—but with three boards placed horizontally at the bottom, middle, and top to secure the structure. These horizontal boards were crucial to our play. We would stand on the horizontal boards half-way up to wait our turn on the trampoline... or climb to the top horizontal board for a very unsafe dismount. It was a lot of fun.

One of the three sides of fencing backed up to our alley. The alleys in our neighborhood were like dirt roads running behind all the back yards. Every few houses down the alley would be a dumpster. So really, the only reason to visit the alley was to take out the trash. And because the opening of the dumpster was taller than my head, I rarely ventured back there.

However, our fencing along the alley was... different.

It all started when my maternal Great-Grandmother, Dorie, told my parents about this wonderful recipe she had for concord grape jam. To hear her describe it, this jam was the best thing in the world... and oh how she longed to make it. But she could never get the concord grapes to grow.

My dad, who grew up on the farm, and whose mother had grown several varieties of grapes over the years, decided to grow grapes for my Great-Grandmother Dorie so that we could make her most favorite jam.

And where did my dad plant these grapes?

In the alley. Across from the dumpsters. The only people who knew they were there were the folks taking out their trash.

Now, I remember my dad hanging up wire in a criss-cross pattern on the fencing for the grape vines to climb. And I remember making the jam with my parents... boiling the grapes with their skins on, squeezing the fruit from the skins, working the fruit through the sieve to separate the meat from the seeds, then adding the skins back into the mix. And my Great-Grandmother was right. The concord grape jam was amazing.

But what I remember most about those concord grapes, is standing on the horizontal boards of the fence by the trampoline, reaching over the fence to grab a cluster of grapes, and then popping them one by one into my mouth on the trampoline. Nothing in this world has ever tasted sweeter.

The skins could get a little leathery and dusty, so we would often give them a squeeze to pop the fruit into our mouths—just the sweet juicy green meat of the grape. And on a hot day, oh! That warm burst of sugar in your mouth was a tiny morsel of heaven.

I think about that sweet season of life when I hear today's Gospel reading and Jesus's declaration: I am the vine.

I think about how my parents used to carefully wrap the vines around the criss-cross wire in the early stages of grape growing—helping the vine to find its way along the wire that would support its growth for years to come. I think about that delicate circular practice, wrapping the vines around and around.

It's not unlike the circular language we read in 1 John: "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God... Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another... God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God."

Can you hear it? With every "beloved"—with every mention of God—with every word of love, it's as if one is wrapping the vine and its branches around that which holds it up.

I think of that when I think of what it means to abide. In some places, the vine and its branches are resting on the wire, in other places they cling to it, and in still other places they stretch to the limits trusting the support in place to bolster their reach.

We abide in God so that we can remain alive and healthy—we abide in God so that we can bear much fruit. But to what end? Does the fruit just stay on the vine—purely decorative? No. The fruit is given away. The fruit is for sharing. The only way anyone can know how sweet the fruit is, is to take it and eat it.

Take. Eat. This is my body—this is my fruit—this is my love, given for you. Whenever you eat it, do this in remembrance of me.

We can't just look at the fruit, we have to taste it. We can't just study the fruit, we have to experience it. We can't just look at the good work people are doing in the world to share God's love, we have to participate in it.

And we don't just cultivate gifts of compassion, leadership, wisdom, patience, and joy to experience some kind of inner peace we keep to ourselves. We cultivate these gifts of God in us to share them—to give them away.

You've got to grow so that you can give yourself away.

You know how the old saying goes: the love in your heart wasn't put there to stay... love isn't *love until you give it away*.

Abide in God—no matter where you are: It could be someplace as extravagant as the vineyards of Bordeaux, France, or in a place as humble as my Texas alley across from the dumpsters.

Abide in God—no matter what that looks like for you: Resting in God, clinging to God, or seeing how far you can reach while anchored to God.

Abide in God so that you can give Godself and loveself and yourself away—knowing there is always more God, more love, more you to come.

Amen.