

Riverside United Church, Ottawa, Ontario August 17, 2025

Sermon: “The grape connection” - Rev. Anne Montgomery

When I was a teenager, I suffered from serious depression. It was brought on when another teenager walked up to me and told me I was cruel and heartless. I was crushed, and asked what I had done to cause the comment.

The news had come that a former teacher of my class had died in a car accident. I was chatting with class-mates on one side of the room, and we missed the announcement. Instead of reacting to the news with shock and grief as most of the students did, I was laughing.

The fact that I was laughing at a funny story another student told me, didn't stop my classmate from jumping to the conclusion that I didn't care about others, like their favourite teacher. I tried to explain, but my classmate never spoke to me again. Many of my class connections were broken. I went home in tears. I didn't attend the funeral; I had never even met the teacher who died, and frankly, I was too upset.

The problem for me was how an innocent act – like a youthful moment of laughter – could cause so much damage among so many. As you may have guessed, the other teenager did not hesitate to spread their version of the event.

For years I struggled with if and when I should laugh, or even smile. Would people understand me, or would others jump to a conclusion that was the opposite of how I really felt? Would I have to explain my thoughts, feelings, and actions for the rest of my life? It took a long time for me to even look people in the face.

That happened long ago, when communication methods were phone, letters, radio, written publications, and comments – behind our backs, and to our faces. Now we enjoy the benefits and the pains of social media. I wonder how I would have coped if I had been cyberbullied. How much are we affected by comments posted on Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and other social media?

What happened to me was painful but not life-threatening. These days we witness events on media as they happen. Some events posted on social media are not only life-threatening, they are world-changing.

The messages we send to each other can bring us to loss and lament. Lament isn't a popular word in our time, but we need to acknowledge our need for time and space to lament the pain and the losses in our lives. Battles in Ukraine and Gaza, natural disasters like wildfires and floods, the loss of the ability to talk things over among people with differences of opinion: all have the potential to change the political and social face of many countries and many peoples.

There's an old saying that “Gossip always travels fastest over grape-vines that are slightly sour.” Wanda read about grapes that go wild and taste bitter. God is not kind or gentle with bitter grapes; the story tells us the whole vineyard is torn down and left to go wild. Isaiah reminds us that when people aren't faithful, even in times and places of lament, we can lose connection with God and each other.

In today's Psalm, the vine from Egypt refers to people of faith and their relationship with God. 1500 years or so ago, in the midst of national pain and great loss, the people were lamenting

the loss of the security of God's love. They wanted things to go back to the way they used to be, when the covenant of love was strong between themselves and God.

That's not so different from our own laments. We don't want things or people to hurt us. We don't want change to bring us loss. We don't want to witness the death of those dear to us, or even those we don't know.

The grapevine image is one we can relate to. When we are protected by love, we can cope with life's challenges. When we are rooted in God's covenant promise, we can live together in hope for the future. When we are nourished by the Word that comes to us in the strong, connected 'vine' of God, through the images of the prophets and the lessons of Jesus, we can become real 'fruit of the vine', rich and sweet for others to appreciate.

One congregation used to eat a meal together after worship. One day they all sat down to eat, and began by asking a blessing and each one giving thanks for something. Michael had just lost his job, and his dear wife had died not long before. "You know, I think I've lost my faith, too," he lamented to the others at the table. "Don't worry, Mike," someone else said, "we'll keep the faith until you find it again."

In these times of many changes, what messages are we sending each other? What support do we offer each other? With God's help, we will keep the faith. We will hold each other in times of trouble and change. We can journey together in love, showing others what God's vine can be and do. That's the sweetest 'grape connection'.

Prayer: Holy Vine, help us cling to each other, and to you, in faith and hope. Amen.