

## Mission Reflection for Easter

Seafarers International House



### Scripture

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.<sup>1</sup>

### Message

This Gospel speaks to our human interconnectedness as an axiom of faith. With the Lord, we can bear fruit by connecting with and embracing our fellow human beings. Without the Lord, we really can’t accomplish much at all. The image of the branch, separated from the vine and discarded, is powerful.

Another image of the vine is a combination of root runners and tendrils, spreading invasively on the ground, in the soil and on the trees. After awhile, it is nearly impossible to relate any single branch to the core of the vine. In fact, the one vine has likely become many.

Today, we really don’t focus too much on our human interconnectedness. We tend to see ourselves more as independent than interdependent. In fact, with social media opportunities, our behavior often borders on narcissism.

We don’t always see the “other branches” — marginalized peoples and victims of violence on the other side of the world or the other side of town. Our social near-sightedness is not inadvertent. In her book *BEYOND APATHY: A THEOLOGY FOR BYSTANDERS*, Elizabeth Vasko notes that *[i]n our efforts to escape suffering, we isolate ourselves, erecting physical, geographical, economic and emotional barriers. These barriers create distance, making it easier to rationalize violence against persons and communities who are deemed to be of “no account.”*<sup>22</sup>

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When our carefully constructed barriers are broken by civil disobedience and riots, we react poorly. Not that our faith calls on us to condone violence, but it doesn't offer a bystander's refuge from injustice and deprivation occurring on the other side of the socio-economic barrier. Rioting in Baltimore is front-page news, but how many of us are aware of the Baltimore Sun's investigation of police brutality: *Over the past four years, more than 100 people have won court judgments or settlements related to police-brutality claims. The victims included a 15-year old boy riding a dirt bike, a 26-year old pregnant woman who witnessed a beating, a 50-year old woman selling church raffle tickets, a 65-year old church deacon and an 87-year old grandmother aiding her wounded grandson.*<sup>3</sup>

There are no bystanders or unconnected branches in the vine of faith. *While visions of Jesus as a "rock" and "resting place" can be appropriate within certain pastoral contexts, in view of the violence that not only "surrounds us" but operates within us, we need a . . . [vision of salvation] . . . that "jolts" us out of apathy and into spaces of compassionate witnessing.*<sup>4</sup>

### Prayer

Work within us, Lord, to see not just ourselves, but the many branches on the vine of your Son. Give us the courage to step out of our comfort zone and engage in compassion toward the welfare of all your children, especially those who suffer injustice and deprivation. Amen

1. John 15:1-8
2. Elizabeth T. Vasko, *BEYOND APATHY: A THEOLOGY FOR BYSTANDERS*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2015 (as reviewed by Donald G. Luck, *JOURNAL OF LUTHERAN ETHICS*, March 2015)
3. "What Came Before Baltimore's Riots", Editorial, *THE NEW YORK TIMES*, April 29, 2015
4. Vasko, *op cit*.

Postscript: Consider visiting an asylum seeker or immigrant imprisoned in the Elizabeth Detention Center, We'll make all the arrangements, give you a helpful orientation and accompany you on the way. Contact Gabrielle Rizzuto (grizzuto@sihny.org) for more information. Consider baking a few tins of cookies for our port chaplains to take aboard ship and deliver to seafarers, or knit a wool cap for a seafarer at synod assembly. Contact Chris Roehrer (cvr@sihny.org) for more information.

Seafarers International House serves seafarers and immigrants with pastoral care, hospitality, social assistance, advocacy and prayer in the ports in Baltimore, Connecticut, New Jersey, New York and Philadelphia, and in an 84-room Guesthouse in Manhattan. The Guesthouse accommodates more than seafarers and immigrants. It's available for church gatherings, civic groups and individuals in need of safe, affordable lodging. Our Guesthouse helps them accomplish their mission goals, and their patronage helps us accomplish ours. "Sleep Well By Doing Good."

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