

I believe that one thing the Scriptures offer us today is the invitation from God to intimacy -- to be intimate with God as God wishes to be intimate with us. Such a relationship cannot be forced, as we know from any experience of being attracted to someone or loving someone when that attraction or love is not returned. Nor does *God* force such a relationship, but rather stands ready for the moment of when we desire intimacy with God.

Jesus uses the imagery of vines and branches to describe a very intimate relationship, but it's more than mere attachment. It's a nurturing relationship, because the branches dependent for their life upon the vine. Apart from the vine, the branches die! That relationship of intimacy is depicted in with other images in the Gospels – the closeness of the beloved disciple who leans against the chest of Jesus to ask a question; Jesus referring to himself as a mother hen longing to gather all her chicks under the protection of her wings. In the twelfth century, several Cistercian abbots used imagery of crawling into the wounded side of Jesus, or being nursed at his breasts -- certainly very strong images of intimacy and giving life.

I believe our fullest expression of this intimacy with God happens when we have communion with God in the Eucharist. In a very real see-able, touch-able, taste-able way comes to make a dwelling place in us, comes to give us a share right now in God's own divine life. It is also the way we are drawn into intimacy and union *with one another* as we all receive the same gift and become one body with one another in a holy communion.

The dilemma is while we can hear the image of the vine and the branches as a very consoling nurturing image, those listening to Jesus might not have heard it that way. Some of the Old Testament prophets had used the image of a vine or vineyard to describe the people of Israel. They envisioned God as the vinedresser, who looked after the people with the close attention and care of a gardener. However, the vine image was always used as a symbol of decline, of a vine run wild. So when Jesus used this image, remembering its symbolic history -- it was as if he'd said: You think that because you are Israel you are a branch of God's true vine. But you are in fact a withering dried up branch. The fact that you're an Israelite will not save you. The fact now that you're a Catholic will not save you. Jesus is the true vine, and the only thing that can save you is having a real and honest relationship with him.

Words are not enough; our actions must show it. In the words of John's letter, we must "love in truth and in deed." We must not only talk the talk but also walk the walk; more crassly "put up or shut up." As the Gospel image of the vine points out, we must bear good fruit, not sour grapes. If we don't maintain this intimacy, and it doesn't bear fruit, we're just dried up branches, good-for-nothing deadwood.

Fortunately we have the gift of the Eucharist available to us, always reminding us of God's invitation to intimacy, abiding in us and calling us to abide in him. Let's never take that gift for granted.