

Embraced into the vine

By [Susan Palo Cherwien](#)

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*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Cherwien's current Living by the Word column as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.*

When we were baptized, we were given a new name: *Branch*.

At the Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd in south Minneapolis, [a bronze sculpture hangs](#) above the baptismal font. *Life-Tree*, by the late Paul T. Granlund, is based on John 15:5, "I am the vine; you are the branches." It depicts a tree with four branches growing out of a central trunk. Each branch represents a stage of human life: a woman cradling an infant, an agile and ebullient youth, a mature female, an aging male approaching the end of life and curling again into a fetal position. The central trunk is a reverse relief: a rising Christ, with arms extended skyward, pressed into the body of the tree—the tree's very life and form.

In an artist's statement, Granlund wrote that "the Christ image is at the center of this family in every season of life." This sculpture and this statement inspired the writing of my 1992 hymn "O Blessed Spring," about the life of the baptized, intrinsically and deeply connected to Christ the Vine.

Four stanzas on the four stages of the human, depicted as the four seasons, all move toward a final stanza of blessing. The hymn begins:

O blessed spring, where Word and sign  
Embrace us into Christ the Vine:  
Here Christ enjoins each one to be  
A branch of this life-giving Tree.

With two active, free-spirited sons growing up in our house, it was natural in stanza two to write of the "summer heat of youthful years." And watching my spouse's grandmother in her last years helped shape the third stanza. Mazie often complained about how her feet had gotten so heavy, so heavy: it was more and more difficult to lift each foot to walk. "When autumn cools and youth is cold/When limbs their heavy harvest hold..."

Perhaps I shouldn't have shared the origin of that phrase, because I don't want to lock anyone's imagination into a single direction for what the phrase might mean. One of the great gifts of hymns is their capacity for ambiguity, for many layers of meaning—which allow each worshiper, each singer of the hymn, to find one's own place, one's own particular meaning, in the the hymn's metaphors and images. So, yes, that is the origin of the phrase "heavy harvest" in stanza 3, but that is not its meaning.

The hymn then carries the singer through death and into the promise of Christ's spring—the whole journey of life, connected to and drawing life from Christ the Vine.

In baptism, we were given a new name: *Branch*. Each branch unique. Each branch a never-to-be-repeated gift to the universe. Each branch with unique gifts, unique fruit to bear: Branch that sings, Branch that tells stories, Branch that builds, Branch that bakes, Branch that adds well, Branch that comforts, Branch that heals, Branch that brings laughter. Each branch going through the seasons of life connected deeply, mysteriously, to Christ, the true Vine.

Christ, Holy Vine, Christ living Tree,  
Be praised for this blest mystery:  
That Word and water thus revive  
And join us to your Tree of Life.

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