

Local flavor (Easter 5B) (John 15:1-8)

Some people can tell where wine or coffee is from just by tasting it.

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April 30, 2021

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My nephew Joseph is into coffee. I mean, he's really into coffee. He reads about it. He listens to podcasts about it. He has started roasting it.

A couple Christmases ago, he took me coffee tasting and explained over steaming mugs how beans from different places actually taste different. The first element that impacts flavor is elevation. Higher elevation means less oxygen, which means the coffee plants' cells do more anaerobic respiration, which create lactic acid that gives it a more acidic flavor. Soil, water, and climate all affect flavor. He says that some people can tell where a bean is from just by sipping its brew.

Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, then you will produce much fruit." I know Jesus is talking about grapes, and some wine aficionado will tell me that wines too are affected by where they're grown. But because of my nephew, coffee is on my mind.

I have often wanted the ministry of my church to look a certain way. To stick with the metaphor, I want us to produce a coffee bean or wine with a particular sort of flavor. I have spent a lot of time and energy over my 20+ years of ministry wishing I was in a different vineyard. I've wanted my church's ministry to look, feel, and even taste like the ministry at a different church.

In one church I longed for us to be active in social justice work. I spent a lot of time and energy doing community organizing around education issues. But I could never get broad-based, deep support for that work from within my congregation. In another church, I kept digging up rocks when I tried to plant small groups.

Now, with the benefit of some years of experience, I see that I was more invested in following popular trends or trying to impress judicatory officials than I was in cultivating what was indigenous to my local community. I was more motivated to compete with colleagues than I was to produce fruit right where I was planted.

“I am the vine, and my Father is the vineyard keeper.” It’s up to God to determine the flavor of the fruit of churches, just as it’s up to God to determine the difference in taste between a coffee bean from Nicaragua and one from Ethiopia.

Another thing Joseph told me: you only notice the regional flavor differences in light to medium roasted coffees. Darker roasts obscure these differences. When I ignore, or don’t bother to learn, the particularities of my location, when I try to make my church into a cookie cutter of the latest fad, I risk ruining what’s beautiful about it.