

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strong rock and our redeemer.

George Ligon. Michelle Ligon. Sgt. Chris Ward. K-9 officer Logan Fox.

Isaac Barnes.

George was a son. He was a stepfather. He was a husband.

He was a beloved child of God.

Michelle was a daughter. She was a mother. She was a wife.

She was a beloved child of God.

Chris was a son. He was a father. He was a husband.

He was a beloved child of God.

Logan was a son. He was a friend.

He was a beloved child of God.

And Isaac was a son. He was a brother. And he was a beloved child of God.

They all leave behind people who love them dearly and who will miss them sorely.

We gather today after an incredibly traumatic week.

Our small community has been shaken

by the events of Wednesday's shooting, and I admit,

I am still in the space of shock.

The complexity of what happened

makes it hard to navigate our emotions.

There is profound sadness. Perhaps anger.

Maybe despair. Frustration. Hopelessness.

While the tendency in a moment like this is to speculate about  
how and why these things took place,  
to try to make sense of it all and to find a reason for it,  
we must acknowledge that we still do not have all the information,  
and we may never have the information we desire  
to answer all our questions.

What we do know is that the grief is incredibly heavy.

Even if you didn't personally know those who died,

our community is small enough

that we all know someone who did know them.

We know someone who lives in the neighborhood where the shooting took place.

We know people who attend the churches they were members of.

We know siblings and family members.

We know others from their workplaces.

We attended Watauga High School with Chris and Isaac.

The ripple effects of this trauma reach each of us.

And it informs us that

none of us exist in isolation.

We are all deeply connected, as our Gospel passage for today reminds us.

Jesus tells us that he is the true vine, that God is the vinegrower,  
and that we are the branches to which the vine is attached.

*Abide in me as I abide in you.*

*Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself*

*unless it abides in the vine,*

*neither can you unless you abide in me.*

The branches need the life and sustenance of the vine in order to produce fruit,  
but the vine needs the physical support of the branch  
in order to grow and provide sustenance.

It is a mutual indwelling, and a foreshadowing

of the Church becoming that physical support –

as the Body of Christ in the world –

once Jesus ascends into heaven.

And by allowing ourselves to make up the Body of Christ in the world,  
we bring forth the fruit of his labor – a labor of love.

Because the passage we hear today takes place in the space of the upper room,  
 where Jesus has just washed his disciples' feet,  
 given them the Passover meal, and issued a new commandment –  
 to love one another as he loves them.

And so, to bear the fruit that Jesus refers to six times  
 in the span of these eight verses – is to follow that command to love.

Harkening back to Genesis where God's first call to us  
 is to *be fruitful and multiply* –

now we are asked to bear the fruit of love,  
 the love that God has shown us and  
 modeled for us in Jesus –  
 to the rest of the world.

That is how we practice discipleship.

And living this relational love is deeply reflected  
 in the African philosophy of Ubuntu.

Ubuntu is often translated as “I am because we are.”

It locates our existence at the level of community.

Without you, and you, without all of you, I cannot be.

We have seen the truth of this philosophy this week –  
 in feeling deeply the ways in which  
 our lives are intimately connected.

And this radical shift from our hyper-individualistic society

is exactly what Jesus refers to in the call

to abide, remain, stay, and dwell in him, as he does the same in us.

When we gather at the table together, we bring ourselves forth –  
in all our brokenness – and reassemble,  
re-member, Jesus' body –  
we become that Episcopal *branch*  
of the Jesus Movement –  
as Presiding Bishop Curry refers to us.

And the *vine* of the Way of Jesus gives us, as that branch,  
the life and sustenance to bear the fruit of God's love to the whole world.

And in that way, God, the Great I AM,  
is made known because we are that love.

“I AM because we are.”

We, as a community of followers of the Way of Jesus,  
become the vessel of God, and through us,  
God's love transforms us  
and the world we inhabit.

God created us to be in relationship and it is through relationship –  
with God and with one another – that we live out our created purpose.

And so, in our call to relationship, in our call to love,  
we sit at the intersection of all the pain we have felt this week –  
including the pain and anguish that engulfed Isaac.

We hold a space of compassion and empathy for all involved in this tragedy,  
knowing how deeply interconnected we all are.

And from holding the space of grief together,  
we will remain connected in our efforts to heal together as well.

And our fruit of love will be borne out  
in the care we show to our whole community.

In the ways we support the families of Chris and Logan,  
and tend to the officers in our police department.

In the ways we lift up Sommer Barnes, who lost her brother,  
mother, and stepfather all at once in such a horrific way.

By holding presence for those who need  
the space to share stories and weep.

And by continuing to share the incredible spirit of this St. Luke's community,  
our care and concern, our love and devotion, our passion, to all we meet.

It starts with that Ubuntu frame of mind – “I am because we are.”

Our radical commitment to community –

to bringing forth the body of God through our constant recognition  
of our interconnectedness and desire for mutual wellbeing.

Right now, we take the time to grieve.

To gather strength and courage as this community gathered.

And as we are sent forth from this St. Luke’s body of Christ,  
we will continue the work to abide in the love of God,  
that we might receive the sustenance

to bear the fruit of that love in the world.

And with the help of the abiding love of God within us,

we will begin to heal. Together.

Amen.