

Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 10, 2009

The Rt. Rev. Robert Ladehoff

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As some of you know, for eleven years, I had the great joy of serving as rector of St. John's Church in Fayetteville, North Carolina. Now St. John's is one of the oldest churches in the state. We celebrated our one hundred and seventy-fifth anniversary while I was there. We had old buildings, venerable old buildings. The office had once been the rectory, this huge brick house and the office and everything else we had was always in need of repair. Now my office was the largest room in that house which I thought was a good idea. It had been the dining room. There was a large bay window with a view out onto the flower garden that was next door. So one morning I came to work I saw that there was a leaf on my window sill so I was going to pick it up and throw it away and I realized it was attached. An ivy vine had grown up through the brick work and this was the leaf of that ivy vine. And so I cut it off and forgot about it until the next morning and there was another leaf in the same place. This went on for a couple of weeks. Every day I would remove the leaf and every morning there would be another leaf to greet me. Then I went out of town for a couple of weeks; when I got back it must have been two or three feet long, so I decided that I was losing the battle. I thought I will let the vine grow; I will encourage it and so it worked its way up the frame around the window; when it got about half way up I tied it so that it go out to the middle of the window because I decided that by the end of the summer there would be enough ivy there so that I could make a wreath and for Christmas I could hang little balls on it. Everybody in the church was talking about my wreath. I did more pastoral counseling that month than I had ever done in my life because everyone wanted to see the thing. Then one morning I came into my office and it was dead. Somebody had been working in the garden and they had cut my vine and my Christmas wreath was gone forever. I remembered my poor vine when I read this morning's gospel lesson. Jesus said the branch cannot bear fruit by itself apart from the vine. I am the true vine. Apart from me you can do nothing. I was amazed of how deep the roots of my ivy went and the roots of your life and mine go very deep. Jean and I thought we had severed our roots when we left friends and family and moved across the country. But that experience was surprising because it showed us deeper roots than we had ever been aware of. Our lives are rooted in God, rooted in the community of God's church, rooted in our vocations, rooted in one another. Jean and I found that our rootedness in God helped us do things that we never imagined we could do. To take on a new job in a new part of the country, to find so much joy in doing it. Now that it is how it is in the Christian life. Our calling always looks impossible; just think about today's reading from St. John's letter. John says beloved, let us love one another. Love one another? No way. Jean and I were once invited to teach at a summer conference. I was assigned to teach a group of adults. Jean drew the fourth graders. When I finished my class on the first day I went to see how Jean was making out with her group. I could hear it before I could see it. It was utter chaos! Those kids did not want to be in class on a beautiful summer day and they took their anger out on their teacher and on one another and on everybody else. They were

yelling at each other. A couple of little boys were rolling on the floor wrestling. There was a kid standing on the table jumping up and down and screaming at Jean. And across the black board Jean had written the theme for the day: "Beloved, let us love one another".

That's easier said than done, isn't it? And yet because we are attached to the vine which is Christ, we do extraordinary things, often to our great amazement. Christ brings out the best in all of us and we find ourselves loving utterly unlovable people, even fourth graders. We sacrifice so that others can hear the gospel of Christ. We find ourselves working hard for programs that reach out to the estranged in our society. Today we have two wonderful examples of people who are doing extraordinary things because of their relationship to Christ. Today is Mother's Day. It is also the day of the Artists Among Us Exhibit -- two wonderful expressions of creativity. Now we all know creativity can be frightening and it's full of surprises. On Mother's Day a lot of us remember what it was like when we brought our first child home from the hospital. I remember Jean looking at this tiny little thing and saying "I don't know if I can do it." And I had several good snide remarks to make, except I was as scared as she was. I wasn't at all sure that either of us was up to the responsibilities of parenthood. But then gradually things began to fall into place and so we began to make plans of how we were going to order the rest of our son's life. It never works out the way you planned as you well know. We were dealing with a very real human being with a mind of his own, a human being who was constantly surprising us, sometimes for good; sometimes for ill. We coped with all of that and good things happened. We were amazed that because of our rootedness in Christ we were finding parenting skills we never dreamed were there. Now I suspect it is also frightening when an artist looks at a blank canvas; when a writer looks at that blank page of paper. Artists tell me that they usually have some rough idea of what they are going to do and they hope they can make it happen, but they also tell me how often they are surprised. The finished painting is not quite what the person had in mind at the beginning; the characters in a novel take the plot in directions that the author had not imagined. These people are inspired. We see what they do and we know that God is at work. Christ is the vine; we are the branches, apart from God we can do nothing. Now I had that little ivy vine in my office and there simply was no way to destroy it, even after it had been pruned and my wreath was dead, the plant kept growing, now outside the building and not inside, but it's part of the makeup of that plant to seek light even if it required working its way through a brick wall. And it's part of our makeup to be creative; it's how we were wired. It's God gift to us all. We're stewards of all of these gifts that God entrusts to us, including this gift of creativity. One of the great joys of our Christian life, something we experience again and again that Christ brings out our very best. So what can we do? We might begin by remembering that the initiative in all of this is God's. It's not our own. We don't find God; God finds us. God provides the root out of which our creativity and our love and everything else grows, so it seems to me we would do pretty well to stay as close as we can to God; there are no short cuts; we pray a lot. We go to church every chance we get. I love that phrase in one of the prayers in our prayer book. It says that we believe in a God who is doing for us better things that we can desire or pray for. Isn't that our experience? Now the initiative is God's and that means we need to be prepared to be surprised. Remember that man from Ethiopia that we heard about in one of the readings this morning? He thought he was going to have an academic discussion with Phillip about a passage

of scripture he didn't understand. By the end of the story the man realizes the power of the Christian message. It must have amazed him to hear himself saying: "Can I be baptized?" Don't we find our lives as Christians to be lives of constant amazement? We're surprised by all those people we manage to love. We're surprised by the way we are able to respond to human need. We're surprised but what goes on in our families; surprised by our creative gifts; creativity, surprises and the Holy Spirit of God at work. Christ who is our vine makes a promise. Christ offers a challenge to us all; he says "if you abide in me and my word abides in you, ask whatever you wish and it shall be done for you". My Father is glorified in this; that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

In the name of God. Amen