Reflection Off the Vineyard

Rounding the bend in my descent on the winding highway lane, I gaze to my left and see a sparkling of light darting back and forth across the sloping hillside in this vineyard country. Actually the sparkles look like fireflies in their summer night dance. The problem is that it is only eleven o’clock in the morning. Nevertheless the play of light is beautiful!

Then I remember my friend Kevin telling me that the vineyard workers tie strips of shiny, aluminum-like material on the tops of the poles holding up the vines to scare off the birds as harvest time approaches. So that’s what it is.

In the solitude of my ride on this beautiful morning driving from Sonoma county down U.S. Highway 101 to San Francisco, my heart and soul quite naturally absorb the sparkles in all their beauty. The play of light moves inward as I smile in praise of the God of the vineyards. The reflection moves just as naturally toward Jesus and the day he looked up on a sloping hillside of vineyards and praised God in his heart. Then he opened up the beauty before him in his teaching of the vine and the branches.

And so now I am in the thick of this image in my prayer this morning.

With the vineyards comes the harvest and with the harvest comes the fall. I love the fall. This season is mine. I was born in September, ordained in September, sent forth to my first parish in September, entrusted with NACC leadership in September. It’s a month that colors my whole being.

But beyond the personal color, September is a rich month in all our histories. We may celebrate the new year in January, but in fact for most of us long-term schoolchildren, we walked into new years day each fall when we crossed the threshold into that strange classroom with shiny wood floors, washed blackboards (mine were green), new decorations, new books, new pencil cases, new faces—and new fears.

Oh, to get through that first day! There was a certain fragility back then that I think was often overlooked or minimized. After all, those were the days where “children were seen and not heard.” Quite to the contrary, we had a lot that needed to be heard. In fact as children we had full-blown spiritual lives as Robert Coles documented so well in his book, *The Spiritual Life of Children*. 
This same fragility we experience in crossing new thresholds all our life. A friend of mine just began a new job and called me on day three and left a voicemail saying, “I am doing well—I’m exhilarated with the job, but exhausted.” The “new” drains us, five year olds and fifty-five year olds alike.

The vineyard and its grapes are fragile. Earlier on my trip to Sonoma county, I was even closer to the vineyard as I walked by a stretch of fields of ripe and ripening grapes. I noticed some fell prematurely on the ground. Not unlike Marc Vincent a few weeks ago, I think and I pray, Tracy and Marc’s first-born son who came into this world with eyes that would never open, beautiful and full term, but whose life breath stopped a few days before he came into this world. The fragility of life comes home so close, so stark, so frightening.

The fragility of life comes home when National Public Radio interviews a home health worker who is one of 1,100 newly-unionized in a New York for-profit home health agency about to go out on strike. “I make $5.75 an hour. I have no health benefits. I have no vacation. I have no paid holidays. I am a single parent with two children.” The words themselves struggle out of an adopted language in an adopted country.

Can you imagine $5.75 an hour and nothing else? And the preying bird from which she has little or no protection is also interviewed and says he thinks the state should take money that was earmarked earlier in the year and provide the benefits. The commentator mentions that this single owner of the for-profit company gets something like $16.00 for each hour that this woman works.

The fragility of life comes home as Bruce Springsteen seeks to immortalize the firefighters of September 11—a fragile month for all Americans for a long, long time to come—in a song from his album, The Rising. He softly cries, “I need your kiss . . . but love and duty called you higher, up the stairs, into the fire.” And immediately his next words push us higher out of his rooted Catholic sensibility, in a prayer become responsorial refrain: “May your strength give us strength, may your faith give us faith, may your hope give us hope, may your love give us love.”

The vineyard on the hillside and those grapes underneath the vines are fragile. This vineyard of life on earth is fragile and so aren’t the individual and collective lives clustered underneath. That is why Jesus in his morning “theological reflection” intuits this image of he, his father, and all of those clinging to his life in Palestine—and those who will cling to his life, death and resurrection everywhere for all time.
“I am the vine,” he tells us. “My father is the vinegrower”—not the growers of religious fanaticism that drive missiles of insanity and senselessness destroying beautiful lives, - not the owner of a for-profit company that spreads seed-like wages across already rocky ground, - not the whim of fate that plucks a life just too soon in seemingly meaningless chance.

“My father is the vinegrower”—there is a creator to which we can attach our faith, - there is a redeemer to which we can attach our hope, - there is a sustainer to which we can attach our love.

*May your strength give us strength. May your faith give us faith. May your hope give us hope. May your love gives us love.*

“Apart from me you can do nothing,” he says. When you and I abide in him, and he in us, our strength gives one another strength, our faith gives one another faith, our hope gives one another hope, our love gives one another love.

But the very self that is so fragile is also so fruitful. We are fruitful. No one can ever harvest all the good done by so many persons on that September morning. No one can ever harvest all the fruit of faith, hope, and love that continues to be gathered into the human family out of that horrific day. No one can ever harvest all the good that comes out of any day when two or three are clustered in faith, hope, and love, whether in the hospital room of agonizing pain at the loss of a child, or whether waiting in line where tired workers dare to claim their rights.

Henri Nouwen referenced this image of the vine and the branches in talking about his own fragility in an eerily prophetic voice two years before his seemingly untimely death. While speaking at “Dialogue 94” on the occasion of his receiving the COMISS Award, Henri said that he had come to realize that God calls us to be fruitful, not successful. He confessed so much of his own life was in pursuit of success in the race that so many of us seem to define as human.

Jesus redefined “human” over and over again as he looked out and imaged for us the God whose thoughts are not our thoughts and whose ways are not our ways. His gaze on the water—a dragnet; his sight on a field—a buried treasure, his glance toward a woman kneading dough—leaven, his observation of a widow in the temple—two copper coins, and so on.

And on one of those days his eyes were drawn to a hillside—to a vineyard with its vines and its branches. Centuries upon centuries later, a happenchance glance to light on a hillside and with it a dim
reflection grows brighter and words spoken once speak brand new again. ✫