

Jesus, the True Vine

John 15:1-8

1 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. 2 He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. 3 You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 4 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. 5 I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. 6 Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."

This week our scripture is a little easier to understand because although we might not know much about caring for sheep, many of us have experience with dogs, cats, hamsters and gold fish, more of us know something about plants. We may not be master gardeners, but we have tried to grow flowers or vegetables in our yards or keep house plants alive through the winter. When I joined a sorority, I had to keep an ivy plant alive during the pledge period. Some of my friends have been able to keep their plants alive and they grew into beautiful vines and generations of plants have grown from their clippings.

In our scripture there are vines, vines, vines everywhere! Jesus makes his final "I am" saying as part of his Farewell Discourses. His parting words are meant to give his followers strength for the days after his death.

Jesus self-identifies in images that are familiar to his followers and that hold divine and spiritual meaning: bread, light, door, shepherd, life, way, truth, and now vine. They all point to relationships—with God, with Jesus, and with each other. Left alone, vines, thick trailing plants that attach themselves to other things, will grow uncontrollably and result in one big, tangled mess. A vinegrower or vinedresser is needed to keep the vines in order.

In a vineyard, the best grapes are produced closest to the central vine. Understandably, that is where the nutrients are the most concentrated. Thus, the lateral branches are not allowed to ramble all over the arbor. They are pruned and kept short. Jesus drew an apt description of the life of discipleship from this metaphor of nature. Jesus is the true vine, God is the grower, and we are the branches.

Branches that do not bear fruit are removed by the vinegrower. Even harder for us to hear is that the branches that do produce fruit do not escape the knife. They are cut in order to produce even more fruit.

The paradox is that the vinegrower must cut away lifeless, unproductive branches and prune those branches that are productive. At some point, all the branches need to be cut. Young vines are not allowed to produce fruit for the first few years. This means a drastic pruning is needed each season so the plant can develop to its fullest. Vineyards, then, are long-term investments and labor intensive.

The notion of "abiding" comes into play when we think of the vineyard. The Greek root for "abide" (*menō*) carries a range of meanings—"staying in place," "enduring," "holding out"—that imply the steadfastness and reliability of God's presence in and for God's community. God's care is constant, and whatever pain or suffering results from God's pruning and cleansing is redemptive rather than arbitrary.

As beginning gardeners soon learn, certain flowers benefit from being "deadheaded." Pinching the first flowers produced by pansies will result in fuller plants and more blossoms down the road. Yet how hard it is to do just that! Those first flowers are so pretty that one wants to resist the advice to pinch them off. The laws of nature seem to contradict what we desire. Still, there it is. Pruning now results in more beautiful plants later.

A sign of prosperity and the aim of the vinegrower is a fruitful yield. Cleansing and pruning are the work of God and the words of Jesus. They determine which branches are cut off and removed and which are pruned. The mystery of these actions—cleansing and pruning—is that the plant looks useless and dead. Yet the branches' connection to the vine ensures new life and new growth. When God is doing the maintenance, we are assured that new life and new growth will result. Despite what the plant looks like, its connection to the vine renders it alive and not dead.

God is in control as vinegrower; the vine and the fruit of the vine are gifts from God. In the Hebrew scripture, Israel saw itself as a vine planted and cared for by God. However, Israel often disappointed God because it failed to be fruitful (communal, compassionate, focused on justice). Israel proves not to be the true vine. When Jesus declares, "I am," he aligns himself with God's purposes. Jesus makes clear that he is intimately connected to God—without God, Jesus has no life, no ministry, and no mission. No harvest will be abundant without the vinegrower, who tends to the vine and the branches.

The vinegrower has tough work to do. To "prune" and "cleanse" carries the sense of cleansing, making pure, free from blemishes or shame. Vines have to be tended to in order for the branches to bear fruit. There is no harvest or yield if the branches do not issue from the vine. As long as the branches remain connected to the vine, they live and produce full leaves and abundant fruit. Jesus' words have already done the cleansing and pruning—our challenge is to stay connected to the vine, which we do by our relationship with God through Jesus.

We get disconnected if we fail to live in love and are concerned only with ourselves. It is all about me and not the community. The community that Jesus calls forth is one that embodies an African proverb: Because we are, I am. The branches that do not yield fruit are the ones in the community who profess faith but

do not engage in acts of love. This does not mean that one can earn salvation; rather, those who see and hear Jesus are moved to respond to the gift of salvation through their own acts of love. In other words, a sign of discipleship is doing good works for the right reasons.

Thus, Jesus takes the common everyday image of the vine and transforms it into a symbol of community, mission, and love. This community is characterized by interdependence, mutual respect, and the ongoing presence of Christ. **Barbara J. Essex**

Jesus has gathered his disciples around him and seeks to prepare them. He foresees the hardships and death he is about to face. As he meets with his followers one last time, he yearns to console them. He knows the trials they will face in the days ahead. At the same time Jesus invites those disciples to enter into a more profound relationship by urging them to abide in him. Rather than sounding a note of despair, Jesus speaks a word of hope and trust for their souls. Reassurance comes from remaining close to Jesus, weathering whatever storms may come. Jesus tells the disciples to abide in him, as he abides in them. In his translation *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*, Eugene H. Peterson uses the words, "Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you." The notion of making a home, of finding the heart's true home in Jesus, brings a settled peace to the turmoil that often characterizes our lives.

When someone is having a difficult time, we casually give the advice to "hang in there." Those are not very helpful words for one who desperately wonders how to do just that. Jesus offers so much more than hanging in there. Yes, hard times will invariably come, but living, abiding, finding our home in Jesus the vine and God the grower sustains us, promoting even greater well-being. Recall the Hebrew notion of shalom, which speaks of wholeness, completeness, and health. Recovering that sense of shalom addresses the deep yearnings of our lives. Shalom

enters into all the cuts and hurts we endure day to day. It even enables us to speak of healing when there is no hope for a cure. Hope for relief from suffering does remain—a hope that God's miracles of growth bring to fruition.

Bearing fruit when it counts grows from union with Jesus. Finding that home in him and letting his word find a home in us through faithful devotion bring about great joy. As in nature, the pruning and the abiding are held together. When we remain that close to Jesus, we attuned to him and he to us, the remarkable result is that what we want will be what God wants, and it will surely come to pass. "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you" (v.7). All that is extraneous is carefully and lovingly removed. What remains is centered and focused in God's word.

As Jesus counsels and prays with his disciples, he invites them to stay close to him by placing their trust in him. He warns them that they cannot go it alone, trusting in their own strength. On their own they would be cut off from their life source. They would bear no fruit. This is a word that we need to heed today. The temptation to go it on our own is great. We live in a society that promotes independence and making something of yourself. Though a valid goal, self-worth often becomes equated with our own success and what we can produce. It becomes very easy to think that it is all up to us and our own resources as we try to solve problems and meet challenges.

In "I Am the Vine" by John Bell and Graham Maule, they bring out Jesus' counsel in one of its verses:

For on your own, what can you dare?
Left to yourself no sap you share:
Branches that serve their own desire
Find themselves broken as fuel for fire.

God as master gardener offers a better plan for our lives. Let us find our home in God's word and place our trust there. The harvest will be bountiful. As the chorus of the above song reminds us,

I am the Vine and you the branches,
Pruned and prepared for all to see;
Chosen to bear the fruit of heaven
If you remain and trust in me.

We are "chosen to bear the fruit of heaven." Jesus is the one who has made that possible. Here is real hope for "hanging in there" on the vine of life. **Nancy R. Blakely**

[David L. Bartlett (2013). Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Westminster John Knox Press. Retrieved from <https://app.wordsearchbible.lifeway.com>]