

Branches of the Vine

"I am the vine, and you are the branches." John 15:5

John 15:1-11 1 John 4:7-21
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Perhaps you've heard the often-used phrase, "The Bible comforts and afflicted, and afflicts the comfortable." This is a reflection on the tendency of scripture to provide messages that are either pastoral in nature or prophetic, either reassuring or challenging. In the case of today's Gospel reading from John 15, both are present. As we will see, **one of the primary takeaways from today's reading, known as The Vine and the Branches, is we are connected to something greater than ourselves, yet we are reminded that this connection is for the purpose of bearing good fruit.**

The author of the Gospel of John reveals this through one of the many "I am" statements he ascribes to Jesus. These statements are a remarkably insightful glimpse into the author's theological understanding of the nature and character of Jesus. Perhaps more specifically, the nature and character of the risen Christ. There are seven "I am" statements. They are:

"I am the bread of life"	(6:35, 48, 51)
"I am the light of the world"	(8:12; 9:5)
"I am the door of the sheep"	(10:7, 9)
"I am the good shepherd"	(10:11, 14)
"I am the resurrection and the life"	(11:25)
"I am the way, the truth, and the life"	(14:6)
"I am the true vine"	(15:1)

Our task today is to explore what it means to say that Jesus is the true vine. If you, like myself, know little about the cultivation of grapevines then it's harder to understand the implications of this metaphor. So, here's a quick botany lesson. Grapes are a very labor-intensive crop. Each year, the vines must be extensively pruned (cut back) because otherwise they would grow wild and vigorously out of control. Non-productive branches are cut off and removed. A new plant is not even allowed to produce fruit for the first three years so that all its nutrients can be stored in the vine.

So, what does this have to say to you and me. If the analogy holds, perhaps there's a possibility that we could grow wild and vigorously out of control if or when we don't realize that we are grounded in something greater than ourselves. In the author's analogy, we are branches that grow out of the vine of Christ, which in turn is grounded in the earth, God's good creation itself. Our grounding, then, is in the Divine, in the Sacred Presence in our midst. It's what 20th century theologian Paul Tillich called, 'the ground of all being.'

The end result of this intimate arrangement is the production of good fruit, which among other things can be put most simply as attitudes and acts of love, kindness, peace, justice, forgiveness and compassion. In an unrelated passage of scripture from

Galatians 5:22-23, the apostle Paul identifies the fruit of the Spirit as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

At our Session meeting earlier this month, ruling elder Robert Babcock led us in an opening devotional and prayer. At one point, he passed out a small form that had each of us identify some specific things about ourselves. One of the items was to write down which of those fruits of the Spirit particularly pertained to our gifts. I'd like to ask the same of each of you this morning. **Which of the following do you particularly exhibit as a gift in your life: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.** Paul states that whenever you exhibit these things in our life, you are reflecting the Holy Spirit of God working in and through your life.

Similarly, the author of the Gospel of John states that the purpose of being a branch on the vine of Christ is to bear good fruit. Our relationship with God, therefore, has a purpose. Perhaps another way to state this is that any good fruit we bear in life is an extension of our being connected to God. The author uses a term he repeats often in his gospel: **abide**. He writes, "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. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit (15:4-5).

In the Greek language, the word which we translate as "**abide**" carries a much deeper and profound meaning than we attach to it today. **It more literally means to make an encampment with, or to dwell with another. It can also be translated as "to sojourn."** We dwell with the Presence of Christ in our lives. John assures us that such a relationship leads to the bearing of much fruit. However, like the nature of a grapevine, **fruit-bearing only comes after some careful pruning, and sometimes even cutting off dead or unproductive branches.** For you gardeners, I'm sure some of you have already done some pruning to many of your plants and bushes this spring.

How can we apply this part of the metaphor to our personal lives and the life of this congregation? I think it begins with **an honest evaluation of just what is productive and useful in our lives, and in the life of this congregation, and what is not.** But notice that I intentionally state "what" not "who" is productive and useful. From a progressive Christianity standpoint, I do not think that this biblical text should be used in a judgmental and condemning way to try and determine if someone isn't bearing any good fruit and should therefore be cast out of our fellowship. Unfortunately, this is how some churches throughout the ages have interpreted and implemented this passage.

Instead, **this act of pruning should be seen as allowing God to help us identify and cut away those things in our own personal lives, and our congregational life, that steal away and divert our strength and energy and focus – anything that would keep us from producing the good fruit of works of love and compassion.** So, here's one of those tough questions to reflect upon this week: At this given point in your life, what might need pruning back or cutting out? What in our communal and congregational life might need pruning back or cutting out? In other words: What can each of us cast aside in order to make us healthier, fruit-bearing individuals, and as a congregation?

Reflecting on this, Gail O'Day, in her commentary on this passage (that appears in both the *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* and *The Women's Bible Commentary*), offers two suggestions. First, **the image of community that emerges from this metaphor of vine and branches is one of interrelationship and mutuality.** To get the full sense of our interrelationship, it is helpful to visualize what the branches of a grapevine actually look like. In mature grape plants, branches are almost completely indistinguishable from

one another. It is almost impossible to determine where one branch stops and another branch starts. All run together as they grow out of the central vine. What this vine image suggests about community, then, is that **there are no completely free-standing, totally independent individuals, but rather branches who encircle one another.** It is similar to the old saying, "No person is an island unto themselves."

What matters most for the author of the Gospel of John is that each individual person, and together as the church, is rooted in Christ, becoming one of many encircling branches. O'Day writes, "To bear fruit – that is, to act in love – is a decidedly corporate act. It is 'rooted' in Jesus' love for the community... To live according to this model, then, **the church would be a community in which its members are known for the acts of love and compassion that they do in common with all other members.**"

A second point that O'Day makes is that the metaphor of **the vine suggests a radically non-hierarchical model for the church.** As the description of a vine and its branches suggests, no branch has pride of place or status. That is, **no one branch can claim precedence or privilege or superiority over any other. The only differentiation among branches is fruitfulness,** and the discernment of what is fruitful ultimately falls to the gardener (God) alone, not to any of the branches.

What, then, are the implications of this part of the metaphor in our day and age? I think it can possibly mean that no Christian can claim superiority over any other Christian; no congregation can claim superiority over any other congregation; no branch of Christianity can claim superiority over another denomination. This understanding is historically engrained in Presbyterianism. Perhaps this should be taken one step further. Stepping outside the scriptural intention, is it possible to say that Christianity cannot claim superiority over any other faith tradition: Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, etc.? That question alone would have been grounds for being considered a heretic and being defrocked not too terribly long ago. It still is in many quarters of Christianity today. Yet, as scripture reminds us time and time again, **our role is not to judge. Our role is to bear fruit – to love!**

Throughout the Gospel of John, there is only one measure of one's place in the faith community: to love as God has first loved us. The mark of a faithful, vibrant and alive community of faith, then, is how it loves. All this is echoed in today's Epistle reading, where in 1 John 4:16 it states, "So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. **God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.**" So, as the community of faith known as College Hill, we must live into the necessity, the intricacies, and yes, the challenges of interrelatedness, mutuality and equality.

Let us not fear, then, the need for occasional pruning. For when we are this kind of church we are living out what it means to abide in Christ and for God to abide, sojourn with, and dwell in us. **For to know the God of love is to live the love of God.**

Amen.