

# On Abiding Love & Grapvines

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

John 15:1-11 | 1 John 4:7, 11, 16-21  
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May 2, 2021

*“I am the true vine, and God is the vinegrower... I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit” (15:1, 5a).*

With those words, picture in your mind strolling through a vineyard. If you haven't done that in person, I'm sure you can conjure up an image from a movie or a wine commercial. What does it look like as you wander down a row of grapes? I'm picturing posts in the ground connected with wires which support thick vine stalks coming out of the ground topped by a mass of tangled branches bearing leaves and bunches of hanging grapes waiting to be harvested.

How familiar are you, however, with how vineyards actually work? If not too familiar, as were people in Jesus' day, here's a quick agricultural botany lesson. Grapes are a very labor-intensive crop. Each year, the branches must be extensively pruned (cut back) because otherwise they would grow wild and vigorously out of control. Branches that don't produce fruit aren't just cut back, they are cut off and removed. And a new grape plant is not even allowed to produce fruit for the first three years so that all its nutrients can be stored in the vine.

**The author of the Gospel of John, in one of his seven “I am” statements that he puts on the lips of Jesus – which express his deep theological understanding of the nature and character of Christ – uses this vineyard image with its rich allegorical language to rightly reminds us that we, as the branches, are connected to something greater than ourselves.** As Christians, we identify that as God, or the Divine, or the Sacred. It's what 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian Paul Tillich called, “the ground of all being.” I like how that fits in nicely with this vineyard image. And **the 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, including kindness, forgiveness, hospitality, inclusion, compassion, as so forth.**

This vine and branches metaphor, which comes after Jesus' last supper with his disciples, is meant as a deeply pastoral message. Before Jesus is no longer present with them physically, he teaches them that **there will be ongoing connectedness.** It's a way of saying, “Don't worry, we'll still be together, and the fruit all of you bear in your life will testify to ongoing intimacy with me.” Or as stated in the gospel itself, “Abide in me as I abide in you.” **The overall theme is one of mutual connection and indwelling.** Let me unpack that a bit. For instance, through the particular lens of Celtic Christian spirituality, and I would add most indigenous spiritualities, we affirm **the Sacred Presence of the Divine dwelling – abiding – beyond, among, and within each one of us, and within all creation.** Sixteenth century mystic Teresa of Avila describes it as, “We are not only made by God, we are made of God.”

The gospel writer also makes the point that we dwell within Christ, within the Sacred Presence of God. Think about that. **This is a deeply organic connection and interrelationship. That's why most of us prefer the relational term kin-dom of God to the monarchical language of kingdom. We live in Christ – the Divine – as Christ lives in us. The natural outcome of this mutual indwelling and intimate abiding relationship is the bearing of much fruit, good fruit.** 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. Reflect upon which of those you exhibit as a fruitful gift in your life. These are reflections of the Spirit of God working in and through you and me. 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 and with God.

The author uses a term he repeats often in his gospel: **abide**. In fact, he uses it eleven times in just the 11 verses we read today, like in these two verses. And the "you" is plural, meaning the community of faith.

"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 of the New Testament**, the word which is translated as "**abide**" carries a much deeper and profound meaning than we attach to it today. It more literally means to **make an encampment, or to dwell with, or make a home with, or even to sojourn with another.**

Like the nature of a grapevine itself, however, **bearing fruit only comes after some careful pruning**, and sometimes even cutting off dead or unproductive branches. For you gardeners, I'm sure you have already done some pruning this spring to many of your plants and bushes, even trees. But how can we apply this part of the metaphor to our personal lives, and the life of this community of faith? It begins with **an honest assessment of just what is productive and useful in your life, and in the life of this congregation, and what is not.** And yes, this is intentionally meant as a "what" question, not (as some misinterpret this passage) a "who" question.

**The act of pruning can be seen as allowing God to help us identify and cut away those things in our own personal lives, and in 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, justice, and compassion.** So, here are some tough questions to reflect upon this week:

- At this given point in your life, what might need pruning back or even cutting out? (I've personally been thinking a lot about that lately as it applies to my own life. And I have made a list.)
- As together we discern our mission and ministry of where we believe God is leading us as a community of faith, what might we need to prune back or cut out?

What can we, individually and collectively, cast aside or leave behind so that we become healthier fruit-bearing individuals, and as a community of faith? I would

particularly ask each of our ministry teams, and the Session itself, to reflect upon and consider these things as we go about our work together.

Reflecting on this in her commentary on this biblical passage (that appears in both the *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* and *The Women's Bible Commentary*), **Gail O'Day** offers two suggestions. First, reflecting upon the interconnected and encircling nature of the branches, she 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 (as in no one person, or congregation, or denomination) can claim precedence or superiority or privilege or entitlement over any other branch. **The only differentiation among branches in this biblical analogy is fruitfulness.** Throughout the Gospel of John, there is only one measure of a person'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 exhibited in how it loves – in how we love, in which forgiveness is crucial.

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.**" Encamps with, dwells with, makes a home with, sojourns with. 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.** And in closing, let me remind you what the Gospel writer, in verse 11, goes on to say what Jesus believes is the purpose and end result of all this:

"I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."

**Let us experience joy in our interconnectedness – our abiding with God and with one another.**

Amen.

Resource:

Jill Duffield, "Where are the fruitful places for sharing the gospel?", *The Presbyterian Outlook*, 4-23-18.  
Gail O'Day, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*; *The Woman's Bible Commentary*.