

I AM THE TRUE VINE

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John 15:1-8

Twenty-six years ago, I was living in the first house that I ever purchased. For the first Christmas in that house, some friends gave me a Christmas tree. But not a cut tree, a live white pine—about 5 feet tall with a root ball wrapped in burlap. I set the tree in the house and decorated it with lights and ornaments. After Christmas, I carried the tree outside and planted it in the front yard. It grew. I sold the house but every few years, when I'm in the area, I'll drive by. Not much has changed except that tree has gotten taller and taller. The last time I saw it, it looked to be about forty feet tall.

I remember when I was a kid going to visit this great-uncle. His wife had just died. He was walking me around his place and he pointed to a grove of trees and told me that when they first bought the house that there was nothing there. He had planted all those trees himself. To me, the trees looked impossibly huge, and I wondered who could be so old to have planted them and still be around. Of course, I'm now that man.

Pine trees don't require much care. You plant them, water them for a while, and they grow. Other plants, on the other hand, do require care and attention if you want them to do something specific, something outside of their nature.

Our reading for today from the gospel of John centers on the care that is required of grape vines.

Mature grape vines have trunks emerging from the soil that are about six to ten inches in diameter. They grow out of the ground and split into branches.

Grape growers have learned through the centuries that it is most advantageous if they prune their grape vines. This is best done at the end of the plant's dormancy period, usually in late winter. The most common mistake people make is not pruning aggressively enough. Light pruning doesn't promote adequate fruiting. Heavy pruning provides the highest quality of grapes—plump, sweet, mature.

It takes energy for a grape vine to produce new growth in the form of branches and fruit. By pruning the excess growth, a grower can force the vine to route its energy into fruit production. By careful pruning, the plant will produce larger, sweeter grapes.

The secret is that grapevines only produce fruit on one-year-old wood—wood that emerged the previous year. Buds on one-year-old wood produce flowers that

develop into fruit. Buds on older wood produce only leaves or shoots. A vinegrower can expect to remove 70 to 90 percent of the previous year's growth each winter.

Today, grape growers train their vines to grow on trellises or wires. In Jesus' day, the grape vines grew along the ground and the vinegrower would lift up the vines to prune them.

The gospel of John is different from the other three gospels in that you won't find any of the stories in it that we call parables—no prodigal son, no good Samaritan, no wedding feast. John does, however, have the seven I Am statements of Jesus. These are as close to parables as we will find here. We looked at these I Am statements during Lent—I am the good shepherd, I am the bread of life, etc. There is one left that I did not get to and that is *I am the true vine*—our reading for today.

I am the true vine appears in the section of John known as the Farewell Discourse. This is a three chapter section in which Jesus explains to his disciples that he will be leaving them.

The disciples are understandably disturbed hearing this and argue with him to stay. They even offer to go with him wherever he may be going. Of course, he can't stay and he explains that they cannot follow him.

In our reading for today, Jesus employs the metaphor of the grapevine to help them understand their options. He explains that he is the true vine. By true vine, he means the main vine of the grape plant. One of the jobs of pruning is to identify the strongest central vine and the remove the lesser vines. Jesus is the true vine and God, the Father, is the vinegrower. The vinegrower removes any non-fruit-bearing branches. Branches that do bear fruit are pruned to bear even more fruit.

So, to review, God is the vinegrower. Jesus is the one true vine. Disciples are the branches. The branches that aren't bearing fruit get sliced off and those that are producing fruit get pruned. It sounds like everyone is getting cut in one way or another.

Jesus reassures the disciples that they have already been *cleansed* by the words that he has spoken to them. This word *cleansed* has the same root (no pun intended) in the Greek as the word *pruned*. The disciples have already been pruned by Jesus' teachings. They are ready to produce.

This image of the vine is not meant to frighten the disciples; it is meant to comfort them as we find when Jesus says, *Abide in me as I abide in you*. There is a relationship between the branch and the vine. If you abide in me, Jesus tells them, you will bear much fruit. Apart from me, however, spiritually there is not much you can do. Jesus warns, if you do not abide in me, you will be cut off and tossed in the burn pile.

But then there is the promise, *If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My father, he says, is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.*

As the vinegrower, God's pruning makes us better. A grapevine, growing wild and untended, will become a tight mass of snarled branches producing only a few small, bitter grapes. However, with care and attention, and lots of pruning, the grapevine will produce abundantly.

To abide in Jesus is to have faith, to believe, to follow, to obey. To abide in Jesus is to live in a close, intimate relationship, like a branch growing off of a vine.

This passage is a teaching to all disciples. Jesus may not be present with us in person, but we can be connected to him like branches on a vine. We can abide in him. However, this proximity to Jesus does not mean that we can simply hang around doing nothing. It's not like Spring Break where we just lie on the beach and soak up the sun. We are expected to bear fruit, what the Apostle Paul terms the *fruits of the spirit*. And if we don't, there will be judgment. But as branches connected to the vine we are part of the body of Christ with all of the rights and responsibilities thereof. Christians are meant to be connected to Christ and to one another. We function as Christians when we are connected through the vine. As the English author G.K. Chesterson put it, "A man cannot more possess a private religion than he can possess a private sun or moon." It is how God created us. To be connected.

There are lots of things that we can abide in. We can abide in our jobs, in our pleasure, in our wealth, in our idols. Each of these may produce fruit, but none are the *fruits of the spirit*. To be a disciple of Christ is to abide in Christ.

As I mentioned earlier, on the grapevine the dead wood is cut off and the producing wood is pruned. Everyone is going to feel some pain. But this pain is what pushes us forward to try new things, to serve in new ways. Complacency does not produce. Christ challenges his followers to bear fruit. It is better to suffer the pain of being pruned than the pain of the fire.

Jesus says, *I am the true vine* not to frighten us but to remind us that he is always with us and that we are connected to him. He is the vine, we are the branch. He is the body, we are the church.

Amen.