

“I AM the True Vine”

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“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide 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. ⁵I 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. ⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.” (John 15:1-8

When I was young, I always enjoyed visiting the small farm where my grandparents lived. One of the first things I would do when we got there was to out back to check on the old grapevine. It seemed huge to me then. The iron structure holding it up was at least 15 feet long and six feet wide, but in the summer and fall the vine was so thick and lush that hardly any metal could be seen.

Regardless of the season, there was something fascinating and majestic about that old vine. In winter, when the leaves were all gone and the vine seemed bare, that was pretty much the only time when the large woody portions near the ground were visible. In late spring and early summer, when the green leaves were back, I would check to see if any little green grapes had begun to bud on the branches. But the greatest anticipation was in the early fall, when I would hop out of the station wagon and run back to the massive tangle of branches, hoping to find big purplish-black orbs hanging everywhere, so that I could pick one, hold the broken place in the skin where the stem had been to my lips, and squeeze the sweet delicious lump of pulp into my mouth. The fact that I would have to work a bit to separate and spit out four or five grape seeds before I swallowed was just part of the adventure. And I would repeat that process again and again.

Grapevines just like the one I am describing have great symbolic significance in the Bible. They frequently represent abundance, blessing, and the generous care God offers to the people. In addition, a number of Old Testament passages – including Psalm 80, which was the basis for the Call to Worship this morning – describe the nation of Israel as a vineyard God planted in good and fertile soil. The people of God, the Bible says, are God’s “pleasant planting.” This idea was literally emblazoned on the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, where a large golden sculpture of a grapevine surrounded the door to the inner sanctum. Grapes also symbolize human faithfulness.

The grapes are also a measure of how we are living. When we are living according to God’s Word – or, to quote today’s scripture, when we are “abiding in God” -- it will be obvious, because we will bear healthy, robust, and bounteous fruit. But when we are not rooted in God and abiding in God, the fruit of our lives is bitter. These are the kinds of results contemplated in Revelation 14, which inspired the famous lyrics I know you have



heard: *“Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord, He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored, He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword, His truth is marching on.”*¹

Or perhaps we produce no fruit at all. *“Apart from me,”* Christ says, *“you can do nothing.”* Those who do not abide in me will dry up and wither on the vine. Again and again in the Old Testament, in times of unfaithfulness the vineyard of God’s people ceases to bear fruit. It becomes a dormant patch of earth, overrun with thorns and choked with thistles.²

When Jesus says *“I am the true vine,”* he is drawing all of this ancient symbolism into his own identity, his own purpose and place. So let’s unpack the idea a bit. To begin with, Jesus is making an important point about **connectedness**. *“I am the vine, you are the branches,”* he says. *“Abide in me as I abide in you.”* What Jesus is saying is that, as branches on the vine, we draw the very essence of life from Christ. Just as life-giving nutrients and water are drawn up by the roots and funneled up to the tip of every branch and leaf, so do we derive our life from the God who created us from the dust of the earth. From generation to generation, a grapevine can survive for hundreds, perhaps even thousands of years. Millions of branches, and exponentially more millions of grapes -- all of them lived because of one old vine.

That is the image the gospel uses to describe what it means to abide in Christ. A vine is a living network of connectedness — what Martin Luther King, Jr. would call “an inescapable network of mutuality.” “Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly,” King famously wrote. “I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.” “This,” King concluded, “is the interrelated structure of reality.”³

And so it is with the true vine. To abide in Christ is to share in a connected life – a life that serves and values all parts of the living body. The New Testament scholar Gail O’Day put it this way: in a grapevine “no branch has pride of place.” “No one branch can claim precedence or privilege over any other,” she writes. The “only differentiation among branches” is “fruitfulness.” “All branches are... the same before God, distinguishable only by their fruit. Hierarchy among the branches of the vine is precluded, because all members grow out of the one central vine and are tended equally by the one gardener.”⁴

Another thing we can say about being part of God’s vineyard relates to the care and nurture that every vine needs in order to stay healthy. Muscadine grapevines have actually been compared to kudzu, because like the invasive highway species, muscadine vines grow fast, and a thriving vine needs to be **pruned regularly**. I don’t recall ever seeing my grandparents do this, but I am confident that, every winter after the last of the grapes had been harvested, they cut the branches of their vine way back. I know that happened because the best fruit comes from new growth.⁵ Therefore, if Christ is the vine and we are the branches, that means that all of us are going to need a little pruning now and then. The parched or unhealthy parts of our lives that are hurting us or holding us back need to be cleaned out and removed.

¹ Revelation 14:19-20.

² Proverbs 24:30-31.

³ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), p. 72.

⁴ Gail R. O’Day, “The Gospel of John” *The New Interpreters Bible Vol. IX* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 760.

⁵ <https://extension.uga.edu/publications/detail.html?number=C1268&title=pruning-muscadine-grapes>

I know I am mixing my metaphors a bit, but since we are talking about pruning I think it makes sense to mention this. If you've ever tried to grow tomato plants in a garden or maybe on your back porch you probably know about "suckers." Suckers are little, leafy growths that pop up out of the "elbow" where a tomato branch meets the main stalk of a tomato plant.⁶ The problem with suckers is that they draw nutrients and energy away from the branch. So, if you want plump, tasty tomatoes, you have to pinch off the suckers so more of the life-giving stuff can make it to the fruit at the end of the branch. If we can just identify the "suckers" in our lives – time suckers, energy suckers, things that suck joy out of living – getting rid of those things will make the fruit we bear so much better. It might pinch a little, but when we allow God to remove unhealthy things from our lives then we make ourselves ready for new growth and new productivity.

The final point I want to make about the true vine -- and what it means for us to abide in it -- is that, when we understand that our lives are part of something so much bigger than ourselves, it is easier for us to orient ourselves in such a way that the life of Christ, the love of Christ, and ***the power of Christ can flow through us.***

Back in the 1980's there was a commercial that some of you might remember. It was for Dunkin' Donuts, which prided itself on having "52 varieties of donuts" baked fresh "day and night." It starred one devoted donut baker who had one recurring line. Do you remember what it was? "It's time to make the donuts." Four in the morning, the alarm goes off, and he sits up in bed saying, "It's time to make the donuts." Night falls, no time to rest, because it's time to make the donuts. And he is completely exhausted.

I think a lot of people feel like this. Same thing, day in and day out. Whatever you are making, it's always time to make the donuts. This feeling is not new. The Transcendentalist writer Ralph Waldo Emerson observed it back in the 19th century, and his theory was that people were getting exhausted because they were living in ways that were at odds with the positive power at work in the universe. Each person, he said, is "like a ship in a river." When a ship is running against the current, or crossways with the current, they meet obstruction and resistance at every moment. However, Emerson was convinced that every person has a true path – one that aligns their talents and passions with something that makes the world a better place. "He is like a ship in a river," Emerson wrote. "[H]e runs against obstructions on every side but one; on that side all obstruction is taken away, and he sweeps serenely over a deepening channel into an infinite sea."⁷

And that one path has everything to do with God. God is that stream of power for good in the world – the light of the world – the bread of life. If we are oriented and aligned with God's power in the world, then our ship will float effortlessly down the river of life. This is the way Emerson put it: "Place yourself in the middle of the stream of power and wisdom which animates all whom it floats, and you are without effort impelled to truth, to right, and a perfect contentment. Then you put all gainsayers in the wrong. Then you are the world, the measure of right, of truth, of beauty."⁸

When we understand that we are all connected to God and connected to each other as part of the body of Christ – the living vine of God's pleasant planting – we align ourselves

⁶ <https://www.gardenary.com/blog/pruning-tomatoes-101-should-you-prune-tomato-suckers>

⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Spiritual Laws,"

<https://archive.vcu.edu/english/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/emerson/essays/spirituallaws.html>.

⁸ *Id.*

with the ultimate power for good in the universe, and in so doing, we become the best versions of ourselves. We realize that it's not just up to us to keep churning against the current under our own power, because in God's vineyard God is the one making the donuts, God is the one producing the real fruit. We just get the blessing of playing a small role in the good things God is doing in the world.

You cannot bear fruit, Christ says, "*unless you abide in me.*" And how do we abide in the true vine of Christ? (1) We remember that our lives are connected in a living system of mutuality that values every branch and empowers every person to be their best; (2) we work hard to pinch those suckers and to allow unhealthy stuff to be pruned away; and (3) we try to align ourselves and orient ourselves with the flow of God's living, loving, and creative power in this world— for when we allow that power to flow through us, that's when the very best fruit will spring forth.

Amen.