

Pastor's Message – 5/2/2021  
John 15:1-8

As you read through the Gospel of John, you may notice that the passage we read today, from the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter, is getting close to the end of Jesus' life on earth. For by chapter 18, Jesus will be arrested and led off to be crucified. These, then, are part of Jesus' final words to His disciples.

Jesus talks about the vine and the vineyard while He and the disciples were all gathered together after celebrating the Passover Seder, what we call the Last Supper, and only a few minutes after Judas had bolted from the room as the traitor. If there was ever an opportunity to talk about wild grapes, this would have been it.

In the next few minutes, Jesus was either going to say something profoundly kind and loving, or something that is so brutal and harsh, that it will end up dividing and destroying families and nations even today.

Jesus begins by saying that He is the "true vine," the source of growth and fruit-bearing, in a vineyard that is tended by the "Father."

The concept of "vineyard" has a long and storied history in the Bible. The metaphor of the vineyard is used several times in the Old Testament to describe God's relationship with Israel. In Isaiah 5:1-7, for example, God plants and tends a vineyard, but it yields "wild grapes" or inferior fruit — a metaphor for the unfaithfulness of Israel and Judah. The same vineyard imagery is used in Jeremiah 2:21, Ezekiel 19:10-14, and Hosea 10:1. In each of these cases, however, Israel is the "vine" and the ultimate source of poor "fruit."

But while the vine is meant to be the source for good fruit, there's a vital link between the vine and its fruit. The "branches" are thus the focus of Jesus' teaching with his disciples. "I am the vine," says Jesus to his followers, "you are the branches" (v. 5). Notice that the disciples of Jesus aren't the "fruit," the end product, but the *conduit* for the vine's nourishment.

If you look closely at a real grapevine, one of the first things you notice about its branches is that *it's very difficult to tell them apart individually*. All the branches twist and curl around one another to the point that you can't tell where one starts and another stops. Jesus' use of branch imagery is thus a way of expressing that it's not the achievement of an individual branch or its status that matters. The

quality of branches and fruit depends solely on the quality of their connectedness to the vine. When it comes to discipleship, each “branch” or individual gives up his or her desire for individual achievement in order to become one of many encircling branches — a community that is rooted and nurtured by Christ and points to his reputation and quality, not their own.

I do my banking with the Fox Valley Savings Bank in Waupun, but, according to their website, there are also branches in Fond du Lac and Oshkosh. No doubt each branch is different, but they are all part of the same vine: the Fox Valley Savings Bank. I have never been to the other branches, but I would expect the same level of service from each branch. When each branch performs well, the entire vine benefits.

That’s the beauty of the United Methodist Church, too. Every church is different, has its own personality, but all are connected to United Methodist Churches around the world. The success of ministry and churches in other places is our own success as well.

The story of the vineyard and vine is a story of everyone being connected and together, rather than being cut off and separated. It is when the parts of the vineyard are all connected that the good fruit is produced. All of the different parts of the vineyard: the soil, the roots, the vines, the leaves...different as they are to look at, each have their value in producing good fruit. If there are unfruitful branches, they affect the whole vine and its fruitfulness. Our joint purpose is to work together to produce the fruit the vineyard owner planted us here to produce.

It’s that simple.

In this passage on the vine, the word "remain" occurs seven times. According to a Thesaurus, there are a number of synonyms for "remain". They are: abide, continue, prevail, stay, last, and endure. Many of those words have overtones of struggle - prevail, last, endure, stay. Remaining in the vine sounds so simple, but it isn't necessarily easy. Jesus is well aware of the difficulty of the task to which he's called us. He knows of what we are made. He knows that remaining in the vine will require endurance and a network of support from each other, because branches don't produce fruit in isolation. He knows that we only produce fruit when we're connected to each other and to Him.

But how do we stay connected to Jesus? Sometimes you might

feel far away from God and sometimes feel that God is far away from you. *We stay connected to God's power by staying connected to Jesus. The way to do this is to abide. That word appears three more times in John 15 for a total of ten times. Abiding in Christ is the key to experiencing spiritual power. How do we abide in Christ? Jesus offers a vivid image—be a branch!*

There are two basic elements of faith in our passage today. One is the necessity of continuing to remain connected to Jesus. Baptism cleanses us from sin and puts us into Christ and into his body, the church, but it does not, by itself, guarantee we will stay there. Jesus is quite clear in the reading from John's gospel for today. "You have already been purified," He tells his disciples (John 15:3). But now we need to abide and keep abiding if we wish to have the life begun in us at baptism to flourish and us to grow, rather than wither, die, and then, as Jesus puts it rather starkly, "gathered into a pile to be burned" (verse 6).

But how exactly do we remain in Jesus? There are at least 6 things that John Wesley, the founder of Methodism offers for help:

- The public worship of God;
- The ministry of the Word, either read or preached;
- The Lord's Supper;
- Family and private prayer;
- Searching the Scriptures;
- Fasting or abstinence.

But just doing these things are no guarantee. Even the most devoted followers of Jesus can still wonder if, or doubt that, they are productive branches. In other words, how do I know whether or not *my* religion is an empty shell? Some people remain in the church for years and have never or no longer produce fruit.

After years of belonging to a Church, when they should be concealed under the weight of fruit, dead branches are still easily seen. When they should be in the background, supporting and enabling and protecting others, they're still very much concerned only with themselves and with their own image and needs and desires.

They fail to nourish. They may produce church work much as they always have, but they don't feed other people, and they're not fed themselves. They don't grow. They don't change. Their opinions now are exactly as they were years ago. And those opinions tend to be

harsh and judgmental.

They haven't grown strong in themselves - in their inner being. Despite their appearance, they're still the thin, delicate branches they were in the early days. Easily broken, brittle, quick to take offense, because they're cut off from the source of nourishment.

Jesus says: "Cut off from me you can do nothing." The purpose of the branches is to bear much fruit, and withered branches can't do that. They need to be cleared away so that fruit in abundance will be produced.

In the Christian life and in Christian ministry, only one thing really matters. And that's remaining in the vine, in whichever way is right for you. If I'm in the vine, then fruit will be produced in me. If I'm in the vine, then I can't help but respond to the needs of my neighbor. I don't have to do good works as a duty, I simply respond. I don't have to give more money to the church because I think I ought to, I simply respond. I don't have to go to church for worship every Sunday because I feel I'm obliged to, I simply respond.

It is important to continue to grow and for that to happen, you have to remain connected to the vine. Paul suggests in Galatians 5.22-23 that every branch, every follower of Jesus, has been given unique and special gifts to bear fruit. You may remember his fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The "fruit" that we are to bear, like the grapes of a fine winery, *is full of many textures and flavors.*

A more general way to talk about the "fruit" that we bear, though, might be to talk about grace. As branches, connected to and "remaining in" the source of God's love and grace (v. 4), we are conduits and not the end product. *God's grace and love always come to us on their way to someone else; someone who will be able to "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8) because we have been faithful branches.*

Through it all, we have to remember the end game. The end game is not just to improve our own personal piety or take care of our own needs – God takes care of that - or emphasize our own personal preferences. Rather, it's to help people hear the good news and become disciples of Jesus, that they might become fruitful in helping others become fruitful disciples of Jesus. Staying connected enables followers of Jesus to transfer the grace from God that produces fruit.