

St. Paul's United Methodist Church

[John 15:1-8](#)

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March 18, 2018

I Am the True Vine

Today we continue our sermon series on the “I Am” sayings of Jesus with “I Am the true vine.” The “I Am” sayings are all located in the gospel of John and are written as coming from the mouth of Jesus. From what scholars can determine, the gospel of John was completed in the span of 85-90 AD. We do know that this is one of four gospels the tradition has held onto for over 2,000 years and that within the text are statements of deep meaning to followers of the faith throughout time. The other thing we can conclude is the earliest communities of Christians who gathered the gospels into complete written stories, found in the “I Am” statements truth about how Jesus helped them to find God’s love and spirit. The “I Am” statements are truth filled statements about the power of living the way of Jesus as we seek to reveal God’s powerful activity in our daily lives.

When reading this passage it is important to know the “vine” is the image of kingdom of Israel. Like the eagle is used to represent the United States the grapevine was used to represent Israel.¹ This image adorned the temple in Jerusalem’s columns on the tops with gold plated grapes that were said to be the size of people’s heads and across the entrance to the temple was a gold-plated vine. As we think about early Christians using this image it would have been one

¹ Fuquay, Rob (2014-10-03). The God We Can Know: Exploring the "I Am" Sayings of Jesus (Kindle Location 907). Upper Room Books. Kindle Edition.

of powerful loyalty, deep imagery to the place of their faith, and something the people of the region would associate with power.

The Romans in 70 CE destroyed the temple in Jerusalem and along with it the vine imagery I just described. By placing this imagery in words coming from Jesus the early Christians were attempting to reclaim this image. In the time before the temple was destroyed it was considered that God-self was located in the temple. When the temple was destroyed there was despair that God had left all the people. The Christians were being blamed for this destruction of the temple and loss of God. It was thought by many that perhaps their choice to divert from traditional Judaism had brought God's wrath. By using the vine image, the gospel writer was trying to let the followers of Jesus and others know that God was the true source of power and even with the loss of the temple, God was still present in the Christ they knew.

Listen to the reading of the "true vine" statement in the fifteenth chapter of John's gospel:

John 15:1-8 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

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

is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become[c] my disciples.

Many preachers choose to not preach on this passage is because the images can be used harshly. To demean others or to make Christianity exclusive, others have used the images of this passage to claim God cuts others off. As I prayed over this passage this week I have struggled again and again with the part about the branches that are not producing being pruned and burned. It left me with questions like, "Does God really just discards certain lives if they are not fruitful?"

Then something struck me as I imagined the nuances of this passage and listened to others discuss the images of a gardener and a vineyard. In a beautiful garden the gardener wastes nothing and does each action out of love and hope of the plants growing fruit to feed and sustain the world. When something is pruned and burned it is done to provide nutrients to the soil, so that other branches might produce fruit. Nothing is cast aside, no branch is wasted and all are a part of a beautiful circle of life. God does not cast branches to be wasted, but instead brings them into a cycle of sustaining life they have always been a part of. My problems with this passage were based on the reality that those who do not share grace and love were determining the discarding of branches. This passage does not say that, instead it says God does the burning and composting and the God we know is full of grace and love. Grace and love are the fire that burns up discarded branches and incorporates them back into the vine, and uses them through the understanding of biology to sustain the branches to bear fruit.

Grapevines are remarkable fruit bearers. They are one of the toughest plants around. One of my friends shared with me that he

once had a vine in his yard. His vine was a nuisance and part of flora in his yard that needed to go. Despite several different methods and no TLC it took several years for him to remove the plant from his yard.

This toughness is why vines are valued commodities. Many of the vines that started vineyards in North America came from strong vines in Europe. Just bringing a part of the vine allowed people to plant and raise amazing grapes 2,000 miles from the original vine. Think for a minute about the amazing biology behind the vine. Deep in the vine is buried DNA that has in it the information to offer to its branches and through its branches it pumps nutrients from the soil and water. The branches in turn learn how to produce leaves to further the growth and finally amazing fruit is produced. Rob Fuquay, the author of our study for Lent, in an interview with a vineyard owner discovered his vineyard produced 6 tons of grapes per acre. All of that fruit is yielded from the power and knowledge of the vine.

Rob Fuquay also shares another story as we talk about this scripture about Jesus as the “vine.” They had just moved into a new home and his wife called him on the first cold day of the fall at work. She called to let him know the furnace had not been working despite her attempts at getting it to work. His response to her was:

““It’s simple. . . .” (Note to all new couples: When your spouse has been working on something for hours and can’t figure it out, it’s not wise to begin a sentence with the

words, "It's simple.") I explained, "All you need to do is turn the thermostat to 'heat.'" Silence."²

Rob then proceeded through a few more blundered mistakes in his conversation with his wife finally inviting him home to check out the problem. With a "sigh" he wishes he could have taken back he hung up and went home. He bumbled around the house for a while and finally his wife asked if they could just call a repair service. The repairman showed up about 1 hour later went into the furnace space that Rob had just been in and flipped a switch on the wall. On came the furnace and along with it a \$50 repair bill.

I know I have felt like this before when life seems to be moving along, you are handling the everyday things great, and then suddenly something happens to disorient you or like Rob Fuquay you rely on your own power, when listening might have solved the problem better.

Sometimes despite all our attempts to get things to work correctly under our own power, we just can't seem to get our lives lined up. Until we connect to God's power, God's "vine" do we often find the balance, self or stability we once had. A good branch allows itself to bear fruit and Jesus, as the vine, will connect us to God's power. It sounds like it is easy just to be a branch, listen to Jesus' teaching and live them out. Anyone who has tried Christianity out for any length of time will tell you this is not easy. Even today my own struggle with the misuses of this passage show that things get in the way of being connected with God. Some examples from my

² Fuquay, Rob (2014-10-03). The God We Can Know: Exploring the "I Am" Sayings of Jesus (Kindle Locations 849-852). Upper Room Books. Kindle Edition.

life of how this happens include: Sometimes people get annoying and instead of accepting them with grace I just want to be annoying back. Other times I think the people around me can't possibly be as smart as me, like Rob Fuquay I think they just haven't tried hard enough. Sometimes the world seems awful, and I just want to believe if I ran it things would be fine. Sometimes people take really good Bible passages and misuse them to hurt people and it makes me want to just leave those passages as wounded texts.

If we read the passage for today again we learn that pruning, growth and a cycle take place in the bearing of fruit. A good branch evolves and takes part in a process of growth, care and new growth to bear fruit. Despite all of our attempts to have a simple solution when things get tough, the real answer becomes we have to trust Jesus, the vine will grow with us, to meet the struggles we are having now. To participate in Christianity is submitting to a cycle with God and the other branches around us. This cycle means we are willing to live in connection with creation and to grow with grace and love to provide fruit for sustaining life. Christ is calling us to be in relationship with God and even the parts of life we struggle with to help bring new life.

Rachel Held Evans, is an amazing author in Christianity. She grew up in Tennessee in the town where the Scopes Monkey Trial took place. She describes herself as someone who grew up a fundamentalist and now has an evolutionary faith. Her words I think best describe how we can find reconnection to the vine.

Watched video: <http://www.theworkofthepeople.com/faith-evolutionist>

The words Rachel used were that Faith should be lived in a “posture of surrender,” and she opens her closed fist to show her transition from a closed faith to an open faith. By living an open faith, by letting ourselves be open to being transformed by the message of Christ perhaps we really can bear fruit that will sustain life in amazing ways. This is what our scripture today is trying to explain to us. The passage is trying to use images from two millennia ago that are tied to an ancient civilization that describe life giving power of a nation. Through these images the gospel writer is attempting to demonstrate how Christ’s power can transform us. The “vine” brings transformation beyond reliance on human institution and ourselves to grace filled connection. This amazing grace-filled power comes if we remain open and connected to the cycle and process of God’s love and grace. The power that comes through surrendering and letting the vine’s power course through us as branches.

The invitation in this passage is that if we hold too tightly to any long held belief, our faith will have trouble transforming/growing to meet the challenges of today. We are relying on our own power, and whenever humanity has done this we have turned away from life giving ways. We need to lay our hands on the vine and be filled with God’s love and trust that the cycle of being the branch is enough, that we are enough to share with the world. We are enough because we are created as a part of the vine of God to bear life-giving fruit to the world and that will make all of the difference. Sometimes it will feel like the power is disconnected or we just can’t find that switch to be connected. However, if we can trust our role in this life is to bear fruit then God will provide us the knowledge and energy to just be a branch on the vine. The heart of our faith is that we remain open and trust in the transformation of our lives through God’s grace.

If you are still feeling disconnected after hearing all of this there is something I just learned recently. Branches of different plants can be grafted onto others. Anyone who has done much with gardening knows this, but I am a novice. I read recently about how through a careful process you can take a pear branch and place it onto an apple tree and it still produces pears; they just taste a little more like apples. Sometimes I feel like I am feeding pears to people when they expect apples. In allowing ourselves to be branches we have to trust that at some point the people will grow tired of apples and they will need our pears. Sometimes being a graft on God's vine means trusting we are enough even when we feel different.

“I Am the true vine.”

At times we may feel disconnected and the call of the gospel is to open ourselves up to the possibility of being grafted back into the way of God. Some of us may never have felt disconnected and the hope is that we remain open to the chance of God as the source of power and the fruit we will bear may surprise us. Ultimately to be a good branch we need to remain open to God's power flowing into our lives and helping us to bear fruit.

This week I would invite you to live out this passage by finding 3 times to pray, to find your “grounded glory” as one of my favorite prayer author's writes. This means to truly understand Jesus as the vine we need to reach out and touch the vine to remember our role. The three times you pray should not be normal prayer times and I would invite them to be at times when you feel disconnected from life...or things just aren't going well. Growing in “grounded glory” means we as Christians connect to God and the vine and trust, even

when it seems challenging to do so. Give it a try this week and may you know you are a part of God's vine.

Shalom
And
Amen