

Fil-Am Community Church

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I AM THE TRUE VINE

John 15:1-8

I'm going to ask the ushers today to pass around some clusters of grapes. Would you be very careful to grip the clusters of grapes only by the branch, rather than by the individual grapes, and then simply pick off one grape for yourself and pass it on? We don't want to spread germs here this morning, so please only take the clusters by the branch!

Normally, we don't allow eating while the Service is going on. But, because we're talking about vine and branches and fruit this morning, I thought I'd ask you to pick a piece of grape as an illustration. Perhaps, we can pass a piece of bread too and then we'll have communion.

While the grapes are being passed around, let me give you some grape jokes which I heard through the grapevine (no pun intended).

Q: What did the green grape say to the purple grape?

A: Breathe! Breathe!

A duck walks into a bar and asks, "Got any grapes?" The bartender, confused, tells the duck no. The duck thanks him and leaves.

The next day, the duck returns and asks, "Got any grapes?" Again, the bartender tells him, "No -- the bar does not serve grapes, has never served grapes and, furthermore, will never serve grapes." The duck thanks him and leaves.

The next day, the duck returns, but before he can say anything, the bartender yells, "Listen, duck! This is a bar! We do not serve grapes! If you ask for grapes again, I will nail your stupid duck beak to the bar!"

The duck is silent for a moment, and then asks, "Got any nails?" Confused, the bartender says no.

"Good!" says the duck. "Got any grapes?"

By now, most of you should have in your hands one nice green grape.

Consider with me just a few questions, if you would:

- Where did this thing come from?
- Did the quality of this grape come about as an accident, or was it tended?
- Would I rather eat this grape, or the branch from which it came?
- If the branch to which this grape was connected had not produced grapes, of what practical use would it be?
- How do I know if it is a good piece of fruit or not?

OK, now you can enjoy the grape. Hope you like it!

Now, please turn in your Bibles to John 15. We've come today to the end of a 7-part series on the subject "got Jesus?" We finish with the statement, "I am the True Vine". The vine was a powerful symbol, and one with which Jesus' disciples would immediately identify. The vine was a symbol of Israel itself.

During the Maccabean period of Jewish history, it was the vine which served to represent Israel on their coinage. This isn't surprising since many passages in the Bible like Psalm 80 and others identified Israel as a vine. But Isaiah's prophecy declared that Israel had produced bad fruit; righteousness and justice were lacking. The vine had gone bad; those who ought to have been tending and guarding and keeping the vine were failing miserably. He then proceeded to prophesy the coming of the true vine. Hundreds of years later, Jesus came and said, **"I am the true vine."**

Now, Jesus said those words just after the Passover meal which he shared with his disciples in the Upper Room, the night he was going to be betrayed. They were on their way toward Gethsemane and they would pass the Temple.

A chief ornament decorating the Temple was a "golden vine with a cluster of grapes as large as a man." As Jesus gave this illustration, most probably he had in mind the Temple sculpture which they would soon pass.

Further yet; consider the elements that had been present at the Passover Meal. There on the table had been a lamb; remember John the Baptist

identifying Jesus as “The Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.” There was plenty of bread; Jesus had identified Himself as the “Bread of Life”. And there was wine as well; now, Jesus points to Himself as the Source of the real fruit of life, the True Vine! Follow along with me as we stand and read together John 15:1-8. Please get your Bibles. Let us read responsively:

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. 2 He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. 3 You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. 4 Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

5 “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. 6 If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. 7 If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. 8 This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

A central theme of today’s message is the theme of connectedness. If I am not connected in the proper relationships, I am out of the ballgame when it comes to living a God-pleasing life. Let us now look carefully at this passage and see our need to be connected to Jesus. There are a few concepts we need to understand.

First,

I. Jesus is the True Vine.

There are two main functions, interrelated, that a vine serves. The vine is the **Source of Life** and the **Source of Fruit**. The vine bears the nourishment for the branches to live and thrive. Cut off from the vine, the branch will die. Period. A branch cannot survive on its own. It has no root. It is unconnected to a source of life. And then since an unconnected branch has no life, it can of course bear no fruit. It is the vine, attached to the roots which draw in the nourishment for the plant, which provides life to each branch and which brings to the branches the nutrients necessary to produce fruit. And Jesus comes to us and says, "I am the True Vine." **There is thus no life and no fruit apart from Jesus!**

The second concept is

II. God the Father is the Gardener.

Notice that there are some things that God is doing in order that life might be sustained and fruit might be produced. First,

A. He lifts up the branches.

Now, you're not going to find that in your Bible...rather, you're going to read "*He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit*" or as the New King James

version says *“Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away...”* I’m going to suggest an alternate understanding of that passage. In the original Greek, that word translated “takes away” is the word “airo”. Here’s the rub: airo has as many as three possible meanings, three different usages. First, it can mean “to raise up, elevate, or lift up”. Second, it can mean “to take upon one’s self and carry what has been raised up or to bear”. And third, it can mean what most translators have taken it to mean, that is, “to move from its place or to remove”.

One Bible commentator makes a compelling case that what is meant here by Jesus, when He uses “airo”, is not “to remove”, but rather, “to lift up”. This rendering emphasizes the care of the gardener. Branches of grapes need to be lifted to the sun so that the fruit will develop properly. Grapes are not like squash or pumpkins, which can lie on the ground perfectly well and develop normally; they must instead hang free. Any branch that rests on the ground is unproductive. What would a normal gardener do? Would he cut off that branch, or would he instead lift it up that it might produce grapes?

Customarily, he would stretch the vine across some arbor in order to get oxygen and sunlight to it. Wouldn’t that what a caring gardener do? A third reason that this is very possibly the preferred understanding is the sequence that Jesus gives here makes sense: first, the gardener lifts all of the vines up. Then,

B. He prunes and cleans the branches.

He gets rid of the insects, the moss, the parasites that would threaten its

development. He cuts away what is not helpful for growing. A vine produces certain shoots called “sucker shoots”, which start to grow where a branch joins the stem.

As they grow larger, they begin to do exactly what their name suggests: they suck away the life-giving sap on its way from the vine to the branch. Before long, the branch becomes malnourished and eventually dies, all because the sucker shoot was allowed to consume what was originally intended for the branch. Sucker shoots will never bear fruit. They will grow leaves abundantly, but they will never produce fruit. They will only greatly reduce the quantity and quality of fruit the true branches can bear. Every vinedresser knows it is important to prune away those sucker shoots to ensure plentiful fruit.

Similarly, God the Father prunes us from time to time, in order that we might grow better.

Sometimes that pruning is painful—some of you have gone through periods of pruning recently, and maybe continue to do so. That’s okay; God is working in you to produce real fruit in your life. He demonstrates His care by clearing away the obstacles to your growth. C. He throws away worthless parts.

We find this down in verse 6, *“If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers.”* Some find this verse to suggest that

those who are Christians, but who lapse into sin, will lose their salvation. Such an interpretation is in direct contradiction to the many verses in the Bible which teach that no true child of God will ever perish. Then, others say that this verse point to a person who is a pretender. He professes to be a Christian but is never really born again.

I personally believe that this person is a true believer because the subject here is about remaining and fruitfulness, not salvation. You see, through carelessness and prayerlessness, a believer can get out of touch with the Lord. As a result, he commits a grievous sin, and his testimony is ruined. Through failure to remain in Christ, he is thrown out as a branch—not by Christ, but by other people. The NKJV and the NASB has Jesus saying, “*and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned.*” It is not God who does it, but people.

What does this mean? It means that people scoff at this backslidden Christian. They drag his name in the mud. They throw his testimony as a Christian into the fire. And perhaps we know some Christians who have been subjects of ridicule by the world because of their sin. And sadly, even the name of Christ is dragged into the mud.

And so, the context here is of fruitfulness, of those good works produced in the life of the abiding Christian, and it seems to me that the best understanding of Jesus’ words here refer to the discarding of any works

which we might do which don't qualify as "good fruit". He is implying that we must be careful that we walk the talk.

D. He gets the praise when the fruit is produced.

We see this in verse 8, that it is the Gardener who gets the credit when the fruit ripens and is useful. The branch doesn't brag; it is the Gardener Who gets the praise.

So what we have here is the clear teaching that it is God Who is in control of the vineyard, and His desire is to produce fruit. Jesus is the Vine through Whom the fruit will come. What is my role then?

III. I am a Branch.

I am connected to the Vine. Without the Vine, I am dead and useless. This means that

A. I have no life of myself.

Last week, Pastor Dave talked about Jesus as being the "Life". The reason I'm alive, both physically and spiritually, is because of Jesus. Without him I am nothing. Now, some of us may be breathing, and we can feel ourselves but we're not really living if Jesus is not the Vine that we're connected to.

We are dead without Jesus and destined to hell. Death is the domain of Satan; life, of Jesus. I cannot be a branch unless I am connected to Jesus.

I have no life in myself. Also,

B. I am not the end product; **the fruit is!**

The purpose of the grapevine is to produce grapes, not branches. As a Christian, I do not exist merely for the purpose of soaking up the blessings of eternal life in Christ. I'm not here just to take in and grow fat and sassy.

I'm here in order that I might bear fruit! One hymn goes "Blessed Assurance, Jesus is mine; oh, what a foretaste of glory divine". That's well and good. But another hymn goes, "work, for the night is coming, when man works no more."

You see, the reason I exist, the purpose God has for me in leaving me here to hang around awhile, is not merely to...hang around awhile! I am here in order that I might produce fruit, for that is the end product. So I'm not going to get all high and mighty, because I have no life of myself, and because my salvation in Christ is not an end in itself. But let's balance that with this important consideration:

C. I play a critical role in God's plan.

Jesus tells me that I play a role! I'm not the Vine; I'm not the fruit. But if I'm not serving as a conduit between the Vine and the fruit, if I'm not producing, there will be no fruit! In another place, He calls me to lay up treasure in Heaven, to do things here and now that take on that eternal dimension. I can choose to use my life in cooperation with God's Holy Spirit to such a degree that, as I am in Christ, fruit can be borne out of my life. That is cool! And that leads to point 4, which is

IV. I have to bear fruit.

That's why I'm here. What can we say about that?

A. Fruit is **evidence** of life.

If there is no fruit on a vine, we may question whether life is present. The same is true in the spiritual realm, of course!

Over and over, Scripture calls us to take a look at our present-day life situation in order to determine whether or not we truly know God in Christ.

The best way of knowing whether or not you are in Christ, whether or not He is your Lord and Savior, is not by asking, "can I remember the time and place in which I prayed a prayer and asked Jesus to save me?", but rather, "what evidence do I see in my life that Jesus is producing fruit through me?"

But there's another question that bears considering: What makes fruit "good"?

Think about it. What makes a fruit good, its outward appearance, or its inward taste? We've all had the experience of biting into a luscious looking piece of fruit, expecting to savor the taste, and yet coming away with a bitter, or a sour, or worse, experience! It may look good on the outside, but that doesn't guarantee that a fruit is really good on the inside, where it counts, and just as we can't judge a book by its cover, so we can't truly judge a fruit by its peel, right?

How is that relevant to us? Simply this: we can look at people from all sorts of various religious experiences, and see in their lives an outward dimension which looks good! There are certainly people of other faiths who lead moral lives. There are certainly cultists who do what look outwardly like good works. There are compassionate Hindus, and honest Muslims, and self-sacrificing Buddhists. But according to a Biblical understanding of the issue, these would not constitute good fruit.

Here is a simple, functional definition of "Good Works", or good fruit to be borne by a Christian: "the right deed, done the right way, with the right motive, for the praise of the right One, Jesus." Those who don't know Christ may do the right thing, and may even do it the right way. If the motive, however, is in order to earn salvation, to establish one's own goodness, then the fruit is not good, for Christ does not receive praise from any work done

from selfish motives.

And it is clear that it is Christ's desire that we bear "much fruit". How does this happen?

B. I only bear fruit as I remain in the Vine.

This is surely the big idea that Christ is driving home to us: *"If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit."* (v. 5)

Without Jesus, you can do nothing! That means that any success I achieve without the power of God is just another word for failure!

Now, these are critical words for those of us who are "activists". My temptation is to go and do, to envision, plan, organize, and promote, and then to say, "oh, God, would you mind helping out with this?" If I ever think that anything I do can make any difference for God's kingdom apart from Jesus' power, then I am missing the point mightily! Someone said "the whole work of the whole gospel of Jesus Christ is the work of the Holy Spirit." In other words, I can't accomplish anything without the Holy Spirit. Nothing. I need Jesus for everything. Everything. Without Him, I can do nothing! I must remain in Him. I must abide in him. And so the question comes, what does it mean to remain or as some versions say "abide in him"?

Let me sum this up into two terms, and then talk about the outworking of these two ideas. First, it means

1. Taking the Word in

Jesus speaks in verse 7 of His words remaining or abiding in his disciples. What he is saying is that we don't please God, and we can't produce good fruit, as long as the Word of God is not important to us. We are responsible for our own selves to maintain the vital relationship that we need with Jesus, the Vine. Someone wrote, "we must decide to do things which expose ourselves to Him and keep ourselves in contact with Him."

Now, the second matter involved in remaining in Christ is the matter of

2. Living the Word out

Jesus says, in verse 10, *"If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love."* This gets beyond knowing the Word and taking it in; it is putting in action what we have learned from the Word of God, the Bible.

Therefore, we must live it out. Bible study is of great value, but our lives are not to be libraries, but rather laboratories of His love.

And what happens when we remain in the Vine? Answered prayer. Much good fruit. And ultimately, a joy that we cannot find by seeking it, but by

doing the will of God.

Without Jesus, you are as dead as a branch that has been severed. With Jesus, and in Jesus, you have the opportunity to produce much good fruit that lasts forever. And it starts by remaining in Him. Does that describe you, Christian?

Let us pray.....