

Of Vines and Branches – John 15:1-8 – January 29, 2018

Rev. Rachel A. Wann

I'm not a gardener, but I'd like to be. I grew up in the city, in a large apartment complex. We had a balcony. No room for growing anything. In my early 30's, when I had a house with an actual yard, I got excited one Spring, thinking I would learn how to garden. I went to Target, and I bought several packets of seeds. I spent an afternoon digging up a patch of ground in the back yard, tilling it the best I could. Following the directions on the packets, I planted my seeds, even building little mounds for my cantaloupes. I envisioned a small, but adequate harvest.

Within a few days, my corn and green beans started to sprout. And then came a heavy rain, and the tiny plants didn't stand a chance - they drowned in the water that pooled. I held out hope for my melons, planted on their mounds. And in a few more days, my vines were beginning to grow. Out of four mounds, three had little vines. After a few more days, two of those succumbed to the forces of nature, but my remaining vine continued to grow, and when little flowers began to appear I was ecstatic. I began to imagine a nice crop of juicy, orange cantaloupes. I watched my little vine with great anticipation

And then the day came.

I walked out to check on my vine, and I looked down in horror. Something had chewed through my vine, not one of the branches, but right at the base, where the vine entered the ground. I was devastated. There was no hope, as the plant had been cruelly severed from Mother Earth, and my dreams of abundant melons were squashed. And my gardening days were done.

In today's lesson from John, Jesus used the image of a grape vine to illustrate his relationship to God and to his disciples. Jesus is the vine, his disciples, the branches, and God the Father is the vine dresser. It is a relationship of intimacy. The vine itself is the source of life for the branches - they cannot survive if they are cut off from the main vine. They need the vine.

Last week, in the previous chapter, Jesus also talked about the intimate relationship between him and his disciples - he talked about sheep and shepherds, familiar concepts to first century Jews, describing his commitment to protect his flock, even unto the point of death. As a shepherd cares for his sheep, leading his trusting flock, and caring for their needs, and standing with them in the face of trial. Like a Good Shepherd, Jesus would never abandon his flock or lead them into harm.

Likewise, Jesus' audience would recognize the symbolism of grape vines and vine dressers. Often in the Old Testament, Israel was depicted as the vine and God as the vine dresser. But in this passage from John, Jesus refers to himself as the vine. God is still the vine dresser,

but Jesus is the actual vine. There is an intimate relationship between the vine and the vine dresser. As the vine, he has the connection to the roots, flowing into the earth, the source of life-giving nutrients.

The people, still, are part of the vine. Jesus describes them as the branches. The vine dresser's job is to prune the vine, so that it may grow stronger. Cutting away the dead branches that get in the way and pruning the living branches so they may flourish with abundant fruit.

Now over the history of biblical interpretation, there have been two ways of dealing with this passage. Some see it in a threatening way – that if the branches, the people, fail to produce fruit, they will be cut off and tossed into the fire pit to be consumed. This understanding is the “do what I say, or else” interpretation of the passage. If you don't bear fruit, i.e. if you don't do good works, you are worthless to Jesus, so God will cut you off, and send you to the fiery pit.

But taken in the context of where this falls in John's gospel, that interpretation seems unlikely. These chapters in John's gospel, from 14 to 17, are all part of what's called the Farewell Discourse. Jesus is speaking with his disciples immediately following the Last Supper and before he gets arrested and taken to be crucified. His message throughout this discourse has been one of assurance and support. He is sad that he is leaving his disciples, and he knows they will be frightened and lost in the hours and days to come. This is not the time for harsh threats.

Instead, in this passage, and in the continuation of it that we will look at next week, Jesus is again describing this intimate relationship that he has with his disciples, but this time, he includes the relationship with God the Father. Jesus, as the vine, is the source of life for his followers. It has hints of going back to the story of the Creation and the image of the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden. Jesus is the source of life. In him, we are nourished by God and strengthened to endure living in this life.

Some will choose to disconnect from God, and so Jesus describes this as a withering. As a branch, it literally dies and is pruned from the vine. It's not a punishment or threat, it's a description of what has actually happened. We need this spiritual relationship with God to thrive and grow. When we instead focus on only the material, we miss out on so much more that is available to us from God.

The image of the vine and branches is an image of community. It counters the Western ideal of rugged individualism – of doing everything on our own. Being a part of Christ is literally being a part of a community. The branches cannot live apart from the vine. We need the vine to thrive. The word that Jesus uses here is “abide.” It has multiple meanings, but it connotes

“standing fast, to hold out, to remain, to endure.” It refers to a state of being that is firm in its tenacity. It describes the kind of permanence that God’s presence has with us. God is not just with us some of the time. Here today, gone tomorrow, maybe back next week.

Remember, Jesus was called “Emmanuel – God with us.” And that is what this term “abide” refers to. God is with us – always. One pastor describes this, saying, “the very nature of Jesus is to be an expression of God’s passionate desire to abide with us.”

<https://onelittleword.org/blog/9658-7wx7f-ekksb-8498x-76zaf-cwr7p-lgj8j-nm52n-9jgdh>

And so, when we abide with Jesus, when we acknowledge that we are this branch on his vine, it impacts us in a powerful way. He is the source of life, our source of strength and endurance. When we pull away from him, we remove ourselves from the possibility of attaining who we are truly meant to be. This all goes back to the idea of identity. Who are we? Who do we want to be? Do we want to be the sheep of our shepherd, the branch of his vine? As always, the answer to those questions is up to us. And whatever answer we give will be displayed by how we live our lives.