

Part of the True Vine – John 15:1-8 – May 2, 2021

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I was raised as a city girl in a meat and potatoes household. The only vegetables I knew were corn and green beans, and they came from a can. No one in my family had a garden. Though I vaguely recall my father having adequate success with muskmelons – Indiana’s version of cantaloupe. The only houseplants we had were plastic. And sure, I’ve eaten apples off the tree or raspberries from a bush, but they grew wild. No one had to tend them. I even remember times of hunting for prized morel mushrooms hidden away in the woods, evading all but the most persistent mushroom hunters.

One time, I took a little container outside and excitedly picked dozens of those tiny wild strawberries that grew in the yard as weeds. They were abundant, the vine clinging closely to the ground, weaving itself amongst the grasses. They were small enough to avoid the blade of a lawnmower. So the yard was covered with those little red berries.

Now strawberry shortcake is one of my favorite summer deserts. There is nothing quite like a ripe and juicy strawberry, fresh off the vine. Granted, these out in the yard were smaller than the ones purchased from the grocery, but a strawberry is a strawberry, no matter the size, right? My hopes for a refreshing snack were dashed when I took that first bite. No flavor at all. I tried another, same result. Disappointed, I dumped my container, leaving the fake strawberries for the birds and the bunnies.

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 fire 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, 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 on material things, 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, a fellowship. 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 recognize that we are a branch on his vine, it impacts us in a powerful way. He is the source of our life, our source of strength and endurance. We are nurtured and sustained by him. When we pull back from him, when our branch withers or gets cut off, we remove ourselves from that source of life. And we cut ourselves off from our potential, of attaining who we are truly meant to be in Christ. This all goes back to the idea of identity. Who are we? Who do we want to be? Do we want to be a sheep of our shepherd, part of his flock? Do we want to abide in him, as one of the branches of his vine? As always, the answer to those questions is up to us. Because God will never abandon us, never cut us off. It is only we who are able to sever that relationship. So friends, let us remain in him, nurtured by his love, that we may grow and flourish into our truest selves. May it be so.