

Love one another

John 15:1-17

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Jesus said: I am the True Vine and my Father is the one who cultivates the Vine. Every branch that comes forth from me, but that does not bear fruit, my Father cuts off; every branch that comes forth from me and that does bear fruit He trims back so that it can bear even more fruit. Now, though you are already pure because of the word that I have spoken to you, nevertheless, you must remain firmly attached to me just as I remain firmly attached to you, in the same way that the branches of the vine are firmly attached to the vine and the vine holds on firmly to its branches. Separated from the vine, the branches can't produce any fruit on their own. That's why you can't produce any fruit unless you remain firmly attached to me. Remember: I am the Vine; you are the branches. Those who remain firmly attached to me and I to them will produce much fruit, for without me, you can't do anything. If a branch does not remain firmly attached to me, it is thrown out onto the rubbish pile: there it dries up and then is gathered up with the other branches and thrown into the fire where it is burned up. If you remain firmly attached to me and my words remain firmly attached to you, you may ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you. Because this is how my Father is glorified: that you bear much fruit by producing disciples, the fruit of the vine.

I have loved you just as the Father has loved me. Remain firmly rooted in my love. You will remain firmly rooted in my love if you treasure what I have commanded you, just as I have treasured what my Father commanded me to do. That's how I remain firmly rooted in His love. I have commanded you what to do so that you may have my joy in you and so that, in this way, your joy may be complete. And this is what I commanded you to do: love one another in the same way that I have loved you. No one has any greater love than this: to lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I have commanded you. I will no longer speak of you as "servants", because a servant doesn't understand what his master does. I have now called you "friends" because I have made known to you everything that I have heard the Father say. You did not choose me; I chose you and I appointed you to go and bear fruit and keep on bearing fruit so that you might ask anything of the Father in my name and so that He might give it to you. And here's what I command you to do: love one another.

Many of you know that my wife, Rachel, and I lived in Spain for many years. Spain is a dry land, not suitable for the kind of farming that we do around here. But, it is perfectly suited for other crops: olive trees, almond trees, citrus trees like oranges and lemons, and of course grape vines.

We would often have occasion to drive through any number of these orchards in the area that we lived. Driving around, you would often see sites like this one.



Incredibly lush grape vines, neatly cultivated. Acres and acres, square mile after square mile of these vineyards, with each vine growing along a row. Machines would then go down these rows and gather the grapes.

And what grapes! (2) Here's what the grapes look like growing on these vines.



Mile after mile after mile of these luscious, juicy grapes. Just imagine how rich!

Now, the land of the eastern Mediterranean, like the Western Mediterranean, where Spain is, is also a similar land for cultivating the same kinds of fruits: olives, almonds, various fruits, including grapes. And it's been that way for millennia. But, the kind of row-by-row harvesting of the fruits, like grapes, has only come later. Originally, before modern farming the vines would have been planted in rows but these rows would have been much less neat.¹



¹ Most of the photos following are taken from the wonderful WWW site for [Vinos Ambiz](#), near Madrid, Spain.

The single vine, a kind of stump from which the branches would grow, would have been planted individually and probably in rows but the leaves would have spread out along the branches and the ground. Still, the harvests of grapes would have been abundant.

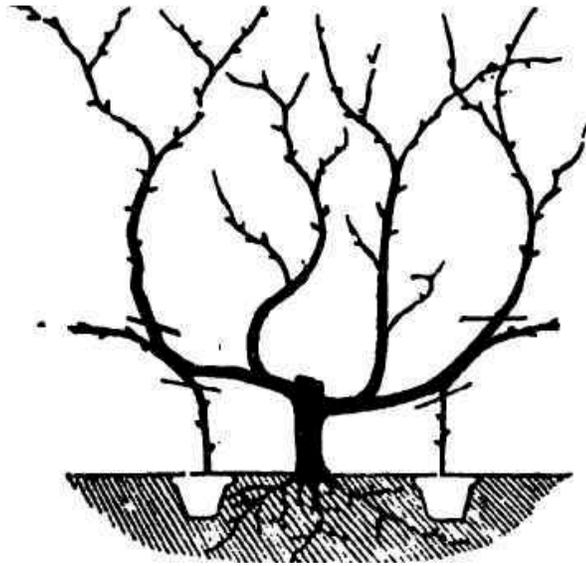
But, they would have been abundant during the right season, usually during the summer and fall. After the grapes had been harvested and the leaves had fallen off what you would have been left with was what you would be left with in any other tree, a vine (or a kind of stump, since that's what the vine is) with all sorts of unsightly branches coming off from it.



The closer you got to that stump, which had once been so lush with leaves and with its branches hanging down under the weight of the bunches of grapes, the more you could see how ugly it was just as a stump with its now used up branches.



And it would be that way until the next season, when the whole thing would start all over again... as long as the vine-dresser, or the one who cares for the vines comes along and prunes the vines. He needs to come along and take off all the little branches that have borne the fruit. He doesn't just cut off the dead, big branches were are just useless, but he also needs to come through and take off all the branches that have borne fruit.



So, he comes through and lops off all the thin branches from the branches of the vine, the stump, and gathers them into little piles,



or possibly into quite big piles if the vine has been especially fruitful,



and then once they vines have all been cleared of dead branches and pruned of the fruitful living ones, he burns up the pile. In the end, all that's left of the pile of branches is just a pile of ash.



And this is all that's left of the vine... a stump... with the barest of branches.



You know, the first time that my wife and I travelled those same roads in the winter, we couldn't believe what we were seeing in the formerly lush vineyards. I mean, where before there had been all of these beautiful green vines hanging down under the weight of these huge bunches of grapes, now all that there was was a field of little stumps and little stumped branches.



When we first saw a vineyard like this our first thought was: ‘Oh no! Someone’s gone through this person’s vineyard and just hacked down all of their vines’. And then we came to another vineyard and saw the same thing, and then another and another. And then we realized: this was normal. And this was how the vineyard would once again in the spring return to its verdant, abundant foliage and grapes.

The vine was a very common sight in Israel. And it was a common theme in Israel’s Bible.

In the Old Testament, Israel is compared to a vine. Isaiah writes: “Let me sing for my beloved a love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dugged it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes” (Isaiah 5:1-2).

Like the vine itself, the stump, Israel was nothing. There was nothing about it that, when planted, commended Israel to the rest of the world. Israel was a little people, with no great economic or military might. They were just a band of brothers that stemmed from their father, Jacob, whose other name was Israel. They were often quarreling, fighting among themselves, even attempting to kill each other. We shouldn’t be too surprised, though, that the 12 branches were this way: their father, Jacob, Israel, was a scoundrel, a man willing to cheat his own brother out of his inheritance and willing to lie to his own father. No, there was very little to commend Israel, either to the nations or even to subsequent generations. So, we shouldn’t be too surprised that the brothers were so much like their father... and their mothers. Remember, it was Jacob’s mother, Rebecca, who helped Jacob deceive his own father, Isaac, and his brother Esau, and it was Rachel, Jacob’s wife, who deceived her own father, Laban. It’s a continuous story of deception and hatred among fathers and sons, and even mothers. This was Israel.

Yet, God cared for Jacob and his 12 sons and planted them in the land and, like the vine-stump, God hoped to see wonderful, luscious fruit come forth in the spring. So, God ensured their safety, by preserving the one branch, Joseph, whom the others had tried to kill; by enabling them to find refuge in Egypt; by eventually overcoming the superior armies and military might not only of an Egypt that had enslaved them but of a Canaan whose land God had promised to them.

But, with great power comes great responsibility. And so God spoke to this vine-stump and said: “I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.” (Isaiah 42:6-7).

True, the people of Israel did blossom and flourish for a time. But the story of Israel is more filled with the ways in which the branches of this vine began to think of themselves as somehow self-generating. They started to say to themselves: “Hey, we’ve done this great thing ourselves! Aren’t we wonderful? Just look at how wonderful we are!” And so they made a King for themselves, just like the other nations around them; they built for themselves a Temple so that they could be just like the people around them; they started to behave just like the people around them. And they forgot that they were nothing without the Lord their God, who had planted them and given them life and who sustained their life.

As Jacob's 12 sons, and their sons, and their sons, grew more prosperous and stronger, they abandoned God and started to live a life in which they, not God, would make laws for themselves. Rather than "choice grapes", this vine began to produce nothing but useless "wild grapes", as Isaiah saw. They became a self-serving people, concerned only about themselves and providing security and safety for themselves, instead of being a blessing to the world, as God had intended them to be through their forefather Abraham. Instead of bringing the salvation of God to the rest of the world, they decided to become a little self-satisfied people, an ethnically pure and essentially sterile community that was devoted to preserving itself.

It was only a matter of time before God would act. God had warned the people through the prophets, including the prophet Isaiah, "I will remove [this vineyard's] hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briars and thorns shall grow up; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, a cry!" (Isaiah 5:5-7)

And so it was that was that, in the fullness of time, God sent the True Vine, the Word, into the world. The True Vine took flesh and became man in the person of Jesus Christ and was planted in the midst of the now-overgrown vineyard.

Like the first Israel, there was nothing about this vine that was beautiful or attractive or strong. According to the prophet Isaiah, "he grew up before [God] like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not." (Isaiah 53:2-3)

In other words, he was just like that first vine stump... at least in terms of expectations of him.

Yet, when he began his ministry, people began to flock to him. Because of his beauty? His clothes? His elegant words? No, because they saw the richness of God's abundant blessings issuing forth from him: healings, freedom for those possessed by demons, the blind seeing, the lame walking. Exactly the kinds of "fruit" that God had hoped to see from his first vineyard, Israel.

Eventually he gave power to his own 12 branches, 12 men whom he had chosen to do exactly the same kinds of things that He was doing. They were like chips off the old-block, or better said: like branches of the same stump. And everyone knew it.

Jesus in fact tells them that they have the same sap flowing through them that he has received from the Father who sent the True Vine into the world. Like the sap flowing through the vine,



Jesus told the 12 that they were pure through His words that he had given them, words that would continue to give life to them and enable them to be fruitful as long as they remained firmly attached to him. They became the first branches on the vine.

The question is: would these 12 be different from the first 12?

The answer was: They had to be different, since these 12 apostles were chosen by the true Vine, and had his sap, his Word, running through them.

And sure enough: the fruit that these branches produced was miracles, signs and wonders, righteousness and holy living, peace and self-discipline... all wonderful things that would be God's blessing in a fallen world. This was the very fruit that Jesus had borne, a fruit that was absent from the first Israel.

True, some branches, like Judas, would die away because they cut themselves off from the vine, but those that remained on the vine would continue to produce wonderful fruit, not because of anything that they were in and of themselves. But because of the life that flowed from the Father through the Son into them.

But...

These now fruit-bearing branches still needed to be pruned. If they were not pruned, all they would produce would be a lot of leaves, but no fruit. They would look good but there wouldn't be anything to harvest. The only way that the fruit can be produced is through pruning.

And indeed they were. They suffered. The Book of Acts tells us that the 12 suffered from the very beginning of their ministry: imprisonments, beatings, persecution, and ultimately execution. Paul's letters tell us the same thing.

But, these texts also tell us that, after these prunings, the fruit was even more abundant than before, just as the vine had shown. Their fruit was on full display and new branches began to spring up everywhere. The evidence is found in the spread of the church throughout the whole earth.

And it is still true today: where the 12 and their subsequent branches are persecuted and suffer for righteousness sake, there the church grows. Witness the church in Africa today.

If you, too, wish to produce fruit, not just grow into a big leafy bush, or worse, become just a source of wild, lawless grapes, you will need to be pruned in order for there to be more fruit. If you are not pruned, all there will be is lots of little branches, with lots of leaves, and no fruit. The vine might look great, but there won't be any grapes, which is what the vine is there to produce.

But, while all this is clear, Jesus continues his words to the 12: love one another, Jesus says. You might well ask yourself after all of this: what's love got to do with it?

If we remember that Jesus has referred to himself as the True Vine, in contrast to Jacob-Israel, which had been the vine that God had planted and from which God had hoped to find fruit but, as Isaiah prophesied, there was nothing but wild, lawless grapes, then Jesus is telling his branches, the branches of the True Vine, that they are to be very different from the 12 branches of Israel, Jacob's 12 sons and their offspring, who were constantly at each other's throats and who eventually fought a centuries' long battle among each other, a battle that ended in their removal from the land and being taken into exile in Babylon. All because they sought their own good, their own self-preservation, above the good of anyone else.

Even King David, that great shepherd of the people of Israel, one of the branches of Jacob, when he was given a choice by God for David's sinful actions as King – "Shall I bring horrors upon your people or cause your enemies to persecute you?" – David could only whimper before the Lord: Don't let my enemies get the better of me, Lord; let the people suffer instead of me (cf. 2 Sam 24).

How different our Lord, who loved the world and gave himself for it, undergoing every kind of humiliation and suffering at the hands of his enemies... all for us. How different from Jacob, from his sons... even from the greatest of Jacob's offspring, King David himself. He bore it all.

And so, he says to his disciples, if you want men and women to know whose disciples, whose sons and daughters you are, the sons and daughters of the first vine, self-serving Jacob, or of the self-giving True Vine, then show them the same kind of love that I have shown to the world. That's how people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another, then you will show that you are branches of the true, life-giving and fruit-bearing vine, and so you will grow into a mighty vine producing fruit among all the peoples of the earth, to bring joy to the faces of men and women everywhere.

So, loving one another, go and bear fruit in the world.

Let us pray.