

“The Vine and the Branches”

Date: May 2, 2021

Theme: Abiding; Love

Place: Lakewood UMC

Occasion: Easter 5

Text: John 15:1-8; 1 John 4:7-12

It’s fascinating to me that in our Protestant religious culture, there is a strong emphasis placed upon the *literal* interpretation of the Bible. Now I take the Bible quite seriously, but *not* literally. Interestingly, Jesus often did not speak literally, but figuratively. He spoke in allegories and images. He painted word pictures.

Instead of literally coming out and saying what he meant, he would often tell a story and let people come to their own conclusion. Indeed, these hidden messages would frequently frustrate his disciples. They wished Jesus would speak literally and not be quite so subtle.

This morning we take a look at one of the “I Am” sayings of Jesus. He said, “I am the true vine.” Now, even the most ardent fundamentalist has to agree that when Jesus spoke these words, he was not speaking literally. Like last week, when we heard him say, “Jesus is the Good Shepherd and we are the sheep of his flock.”

When Jesus spoke about vineyards, the people of Judea could immediately relate to what he was talking about. It was an industry which had been carefully cultivated throughout the country for centuries. It was crucial, because it was a cash crop, as opposed to grain, which was raised purely for consumption. Grapes were how many people made their money.

A vineyard was the symbol of the nation. In America we might think of amber waves of grain, but in Judea they thought of their nation as a

vineyard. It was a kind of national identity. Over and over again in the Old Testament, Israel is pictured as the vine, or the vineyard of God.

In Jesus' analogy, he likened himself to a vine, while the fruit-bearing branches are his disciples. God, the farmer, is depicted as the one who cultivates the vineyard. He waters and tends the soil, so the vine is properly nourished. The farmer also prunes the vines and removes the dead wood, to make room for healthy new growth. The farmer takes pride in his crop.

What Jesus is saying is clear. The disciples should receive their strength from Jesus. He is the true vine. If they break away from him, they will be like unproductive branches, and bear no fruit. They will then have to be pruned. So, what can we make of this analogy in terms of our daily life?

I have only two points this morning: The first one is this - we are to bear fruit. The second one naturally follows. If we are to bear fruit, then we must remain in communion with Jesus. We must *abide* in Him. Jesus is the vine and we are the branches, and it is our job to bear fruit.

Now, a grapevine is a most productive plant. Spreading out its branches, each one is intended to bring forth fruit. No vine dresser is foolish enough to invest his time and effort in cultivating vines merely for their pretty leaves. The farmer looks for results. Fruits! Grapes!

As the branches of Christ in the Kingdom of God, you and I are expected to produce the fruits of the spiritual life. And no, I'm not talking about spiritual apples, pears or peaches this morning. I'm talking about the fruit of the spirit, the result of our life of being connected to Jesus.

St. Paul spoke about the fruit of the Spirit in his letter to the Galatians.

He said, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." How's that for a fruit basket? Well, let me ask you this, "What's growing in your orchard?"

The truth is: we cannot produce a healthy harvest of spiritual fruit, unless we, the branches, remain connected to the vine. We must abide in Christ. We need to maintain a vital, healthy relationship with Jesus, our Lord. On our own, we can do good things. But we will not live the vital Christian life which God intends for us, unless we are connected to Christ our Savior.

I once heard a story about a five-year old boy who fell out of bed. His cry awakened the entire house-hold. After his mother had safely tucked him back into bed, under the covers, she said, "Why did you fall out of bed? What happened?" In between sobs and tears he said, "Well, I guess I went to sleep too close to where I got in."

Far too many Christians make the same mistake. They fall out of the bed of life and then go to heaven; yet they slept too close to where they got in. They knew Jesus. They had "gotten saved." But they never grew in the likeness of Christ. Let me put it another way.

They didn't know the difference between union and communion. Allow me to explain what I mean. Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches." When you trust Christ, you become a branch in his vine. *That* is union. But then he goes on to say, "He who abides in me, and I in him, bears much fruit." Now *that* is communion.

Union is the basis of communion. To abide in Christ is a 24-hour a day, seven-day-a-week, 52 week-a-year intimate relationship with Him, so that you become a fruit-bearing branch. Communion, then, is partaking of

Christ and incorporating him into who you are, allowing him to transform you. It's not just eating bread and drinking juice; it's a living relationship.

One man tells the story about a severe thunderstorm that struck his neighborhood. His neighbor had a tree, and the winds tore off several large limbs. It took his neighbor a few days to have the limbs cut up and removed. He said, "There was something very noticeable about the limbs t laying there on the ground, torn off from the trunk of the tree. They died."

This may sound very trite, and you might be thinking, "Well of course they did. A branch can't live cut off from the tree." But then it hit me. "I too know this fact, but seeing them lying dead really drilled home the reality that apart from the tree, the limb cannot survive. And I understood what Jesus was talking about."

We cannot live the Christian life and be fruitful Christians apart from Christ, any more than those limbs could live after being torn off from the tree trunk. Every branch draws it identity, its sustenance, and its very life from the vine.

So how do we abide in Christ? You know the answer - it is time spent in prayer, on a regular basis. It's reading God's Word, especially reading the Gospels and the teachings of Jesus. It's participating in worship, on a regular basis. It's partaking of the sacraments - both baptism and communion.

Abide in Christ, and allow Him to abide in you. Allow Jesus to permeate your life, to marinate your soul with His love, and to saturate your being with His presence. If we practice the spiritual disciplines, then people will recognize that we are one of Jesus followers, by the fruit of our lives.

Amen? Amen!