

Sermon I Am the True Vine April 29, 2018

Jesus said, "I Am the true Vine, and My Father is the Gardener. God lops off every branch that doesn't produce. And God prunes those branches that bear fruit for even larger crops. God has already tended you by pruning you back for greater strength and usefulness by means of the commands I gave you. Take care to live in Me, and let Me live in you. For a branch can't produce fruit when severed from the vine. Nor can you be fruitful apart from Me. Yes, I Am the Vine; you are the branches. Whoever lives in Me and I in them shall produce a large crop of fruit. For apart from Me you can't do a thing. If anyone separates from Me, they are thrown away like a useless branch, wither, and are gathered into a pile with all the others and burned. But if you stay in Me and obey My commands, you may ask any request you like, and it will be granted! My true disciples produce bountiful harvests. This brings great glory to My Father." John 15:1-8

Jesus talked with His disciples about His death. He wanted to prepare them for that terrible and inevitable event... for the trials they'd face, and the loss and hopelessness they'd feel. During these talks Jesus had with the men and women who followed Him, He'd washed their feet; He'd promised them a place in God's house; He'd told them about the coming of the Holy Spirit, the one He called the Comforter and Advocate; and He'd given them a new commandment to love each other.

Even before Jesus' arrest and trial the disciples were grieved and afraid, and Jesus spoke with them - revealing His part in God's plan - telling them what would happen to Him and to them. He said to His bewildered disciples what He still says to us: "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." Change is hard. Loss is hard. Fear can grab you by the throat and paralyze you and make you believe the devil's lie that God has abandoned you. Jesus knew this, and He talked with His disciples about how to defend themselves against the coming changes. He said that the protection His disciples need against being marionettes who dangle from the devil's strings - acting out in fear and anger and helplessness - the protection we need is to be at home with Jesus and let Him be at home in us. Jesus said, "I Am the true vine." He spoke of Himself in this way - with the same words God used to reveal God's Self to Moses in the Sinai Desert. God

said (in response to Moses' question about about who was sending him to demand that Pharaoh let the Israelites go) God said to Moses, "I-AM-WHO-I-AM. Tell the People of Israel, 'I-AM sent me to you.'" Jesus revealed Himself as "I Am" in seven "I Am" statements, including this one, "I Am the true vine."

The word "true" here doesn't mean the opposite of false, it means authentic. Jesus said, "I Am the authentic vine." In the Hebrew Scriptures Israel was referred to as the fruitful vineyard, but God was increasingly disappointed and enraged by the Hebrew people's unfaithfulness and forgetfulness as God's chosen people. Jesus said to His disciples, "I Am the true vine. Abide in Me, as I abide in you. Let My words abide in you." Abide. It means wait, and stay, and endure. In the Message translation, of John's gospel, Jesus says to the disciples, "Live in Me. Make your home in Me just as I do in you."

Jesus' words about unfaithful and unproductive followers being cut down and burned sound fearsome and condemning, and it can be difficult to wrap our heads around the idea that if we're not bearing fruit for God's Kingdom we're not worth anything except kindling. But Jesus was making a point (maybe with hyperbole but in all seriousness) that if we're not at home in Christ and He's not at home in us, then we're fooling ourselves that we're a part of God's Kingdom being built and revealed on earth as it is in heaven. Bearing fruit for the Kingdom of God isn't as much our good works (that is, what we do) as it is our spiritual health (that is, how we live.) The Apostle Paul would write to the Roman church much later about the "fruit" that identifies us as followers of Jesus; fruit that's needed to nourish and grow and reveal God's Kingdom. He called these the "fruit of the Spirit" or evidence that we are Jesus-followers: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. We might naturally have a couple of

these characteristics and maybe we can fake a few more, but the truth is that without abiding in Jesus, and without Jesus at home in us, we don't have the ability to bear this kind of fruit. And there's nothing in the culture surrounding us or in the world around us that encourages us to bear Kingdom-fruit. And there's not any real human motivation either to be an orchard of Holy Spirit fruit. This really can only happen when Jesus lives in us and we live in Him.

An orchard is more than one tree, just as a vine is more than one branch. We are connected to Jesus and we are connected to each other. So part of being the fruit-bearing vine that nourishes the world, and reveals God's Kingdom, is just being here. It's showing up to worship, to study, to sing, to pray, and to love each other. Shortly after Jesus spoke to the disciples about His suffering and death, Jesus gave them a new commandment to hold them together: to love each other. If we're honest we know that it's easier to love people we don't actually know and interact with than it is to love those who serve on ministry teams with us, and who sit in the pews with us, and who live next door to us, and who share our DNA. But again, in all seriousness Jesus said that it's how we love each other that is evidence that we know Him, and that He lives in us, and we live in Him. This is work, and most of us don't want to work at our faith... and yet, there's something irresistible about being known and loved, about being forgiven, about belonging, about having a mission and purpose... there's something about knowing Jesus that makes it worth the effort to work at our faith.

Because we are branches connected to the true vine, Jesus, we can practice, we can live out our faith. It's only as the branches connected to the true vine, that that vow we make when we join the church to "perfect each other in love" makes any sense...

because this is a place where we practice loving and forgiving and encouraging each other together; because we are only a fruit-bearing vineyard... together. Being separate - from each other and from Jesus - we aren't can't as faithful, fruitful followers of Jesus. These are some good questions to ponder: How am I connected to Jesus, the true vine? Where am I connected to the branches (the church, the community of believers) who are part of the fruitful vineyard of God? How fruitful is my church in showing love and the other identifying "fruit of the Holy Spirit"? How do I (and how do we as the church) abide in Jesus? How do we need to grow as His disciples so that the community surrounding us and the world around us is nurtured, and God's Kingdom is revealed? Even working with one of those questions in the coming week can reveal something to you about where you - and where we - need to grow and be pruned, and where we need to put our trust in God, the vine-tender and vintner.

Diana Naldoza and Judy Garvens and I are taking a yoga class at Acalanes Adult School. On Friday we were practicing holding some unnatural pose and the teacher told us to find a focal point. I looked up at the exit sign, and then I noticed that all around the room at every door there was an exit sign. In order to keep my balance standing on one foot, I reflected on life the doors through which people we love and rely on, exit. We ourselves exit through many, many doors in this life, and finally we exit from here into eternity. I have six more Sundays here with you, and I don't want to pretend that it isn't painful, and that my trust-muscle is being exercised as surely my balance was being exercised in yoga. I'm trusting that God has a plan for this exit.

Jesus spoke with His disciples about God's plan, acknowledging that there would be suffering and pain for all of them, and death for Himself. Talking about Himself as the

true vine was a way for Jesus to reassure them that He was one with the great "I Am". When we know Jesus was know God. Talking about Himself as the true vine was also a lesson in the defensive arts of resisting the devil focusing us on fear and anger and despair whenever we are confronted with a door marked "exit". Jesus told the disciples, His closest friends, what He would tell us today: that how we survive and thrive in these uncertain times, and how we trust God with all the doors with exit signs above them - through which anyone we love, at any time, can walk through - how we live as faithful followers of Jesus is to make our home in Him, and let Him make His home in us.

How do we abide in Jesus, and let Him abide in us? We show up. We show up for Jesus by seeing for Him in the world, and looking for where we miss Him and where we need to find Him. We listen for Jesus inside ourselves, and we listen for Him in the voices of people who love us, and in the voices of people who hate us. We forgive others and ourselves. We have regular spiritual practices like worship and prayer and reading scripture and talking about our faith and being thankful. All these are ways we abide in Jesus and let Him make His home in us. All these are ways we exercise our faith-muscles.

We also show up for each other. We come to worship regularly. We support the ministries of the church because supporting them with our finances and our participation strengthens both the ministries and our commitment to follow Jesus. We pray for each other and with each other. We tell the stories of our faith and our "God-sightings" to everyone who will listen because it can tell them something about Jesus. We choose to believe that there are little pieces of God's Kingdom scattered throughout the world and we look for them and gather them and marvel at the ways God is being revealed to us. We choose to believe that there's some of God's divinity, God's image, in us and we

cherish and nurture and marvel at that too. And we persistently and stubbornly love each other, even when we don't feel like it, with the persistent, stubborn love God has for us. All these too are ways we abide in Jesus and let Him make His home in us.

This is the season of Easter, when stores have replaced chocolate bunnies with sunscreen and flipflops. But for Christians it's still the season of Easter, and we're still amazed at the resurrection, and we're still wondering what it means that Christ is alive, and how we're going to live differently since we know that He triumphed over sin and hell and death. Maybe this is the season - between chocolate bunnies and sunscreen – maybe this is the season to abide in Christ.

Let's sing one more time the third verse of "Abide with Me". It's on page 3 of the worship program. "I need Thy presence every passing hour. What but Thy grace can foil the tempter's power? Who, like Thyself, my guide and stay can be? Through cloud and sunshine, Lord, abide with me." Amen.