

Jesus said: I am the real vine, My Father is the vine-dresser. He removes any of My branches which are not bearing fruit and He prunes every branch that does bear fruit to increase its yield. Now, you have already been pruned by My words. You must go on growing in Me and I will grow in you. For just as the branch cannot bear any fruit unless it shares the life of the vine, so you can produce nothing unless you go on growing in Me. I am the vine itself, you are the branches. It is the one who shares My life and whose life I share who proves fruitful. For the plain fact is that apart from Me you can do nothing at all. The person who does not share My life is like a branch that is broken off and withers away. He or she becomes just like dry sticks that are picked up and used for firewood. But if you live your life in Me, and My words live in your hearts, you can ask for whatever you like and it will come true for you. This is how My father will be glorified - in your becoming fruitful and being My disciples. *J.B. Phillips New Testament translation*

Almost every Friday Ralph, and our “Emerson-rescue-puppy” Zelda, and I walk. We find some new place in the East Bay that allows dogs, preferably near water, to walk. I do three things on these walks... I try to be present to the gift and the joy of the place and the company; I try to “walk off the week” by mentally casting off the burdens of the week. (If we’re walking at the ocean I imagine throwing my cares over the waves and into God’s hands.) And I try to spend time with the scripture for the coming Sunday. This last Friday we went to Pt. Richmond and walked along the old railroad ties beside the bay. Water is a physical reminder to me of the spiritual beauty and presence of God. As we walked beside the water I began to pray the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. (Really what happened was that the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm began praying in me, if that makes any sense.) “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul.” I was moved, as if I’d never heard the words before, “I shall not want.” I wondered what it would be like if I was truly able to follow and trust God with all aspects of my life, as a sheep follows and trusts a shepherd with its very life. “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.” The Common Jewish Bible translates it “I lack nothing.” The Living Bible translation is “I have everything I need.”

This week’s world news has been particularly difficult and disturbing. Another death by police of another young, black man. And in the wake of his death, uneasiness has been unleashed, not just in Baltimore and Oakland, but uneasiness around us and within us. A sense of fear has been unleashed, with the realization that we can’t ignore racism and poverty and desperate want, and the hopelessness of our brothers and sisters, anymore. On BART coming home from SFO on Thursday morning I saw written on the asphalt in a yard, “Black Lives Matter.” I felt kind of despairing about the church’s response to racism, and I prayed, “Good Shepherd, who gives us what we need, where are You?”

The devastating earthquake in Nepal - seeing the substandard living conditions, and again, the poverty and hopelessness - of God’s children is more heart-wrenching stuff. I read the news and I wonder what we, the church, the Body of Christ, have to offer, and how we are responding to the desperate cries of those in need, who share this planet with us.

At this intersection of Psalm 23 and tragic world news is today’s scripture from John’s gospel: “I Am the vine itself, you are the branches. It is the one who shares My life and whose life I share who proves fruitful. For the plain fact is that apart from Me you can do nothing at all.” This

is one of eight “I Am” statements Jesus made, including “I Am the light of the world; I Am the bread of life; I Am the door; I Am the good shepherd.”

“I Am the vine.” In this lesson Jesus taught to His first disciples He emphasized what defines the relationship of vine (Himself) and branches (His disciples) as prayer, community, and self-giving love. I also think this also defines what the world needs most. Prayer: that is relationship and connection with God; Community: a sense of being known, and belonging, and then because of that being less alienated, hostile, and fearful; and Self-giving love: using our time and talents to help and serve others in need. I think this is what the Church has to offer, what we can model, what we can invite people to do with us. Then through our prayer, our community, and our self-giving love, Jesus the vine (the source of life and love) will be made known. This is a “sweet spot” - an intersection - where the church can meet the world and reveal Jesus Christ. Theologian and author Frederick Buechner says it like this: “The place God calls [us] to is the place where [our] deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

If we abide in Jesus, He said, we are green, life-giving, fruit-bearing branches. To me, that’s the place of our deep gladness - being life-giving, fruit-bearing branches. To abide means to live, to make our home somewhere. Prayer is one of the ways we make our home in Jesus. If you don’t have a regular prayer practice I challenge you for one week to set aside 15 minutes to listen to God. Seven days for 15 minutes. That’s only 105 minutes, which is less than 2 hours. In the coming week, I challenge you to set aside 15 minutes each day to listen to God. Find someplace quiet. Take a few deep breaths. Then set your timer for 15 minutes and be still. Listen. Listen and imagine the love that flows from Jesus, the vine, into you, the branch. At the end of the 15 minutes of listening you can express other prayers of “please” and “thank you.” But for 15 minutes be still. Be still and abide in Jesus, the vine.

More about the vine and the branches from Jesus: “You must go on growing in Me and I will grow in you. For just as the branch cannot bear any fruit unless it shares the life of the vine, so you can produce nothing unless you go on growing in Me.” You might be tired of hearing me say that small groups are vital to spiritual growth. (But they are.) Small groups are where we test and express our theology. We are all theologians whether or not we talk about faith, because we live out of our beliefs; we live our faith, our theology. And sometimes our theology is deadwood (immature, outdated, rigid, self-serving) and, as Jesus said, needs to be cut away. As we do theology - pray, read scripture, respond to world news, share what brings us joy and what causes us sorrow, help and serve those in need... all the ways we “do” theology together - it helps us grow in our understanding and knowledge and love of God. In a small group community we learn and practice ways to be connected to Jesus, the vine, the lover and giver and sustainer of life. And as our connection to the vine grows stronger and surer we are less afraid and less unsettled by... life. When we are less afraid we are more likely to be at peace. And peace is something in short supply in this world, and something people everywhere are desperate to experience. Jesus said unless we abide in Him we can do nothing. But when we abide in Him and experience love and strength from Him... we can bring peace to troubled places. (Including the troubled places within us.)

I thank God for the devotion and participation we have in Sunday worship. But it’s not enough to keep our spiritual branches green and supple. That happens in small groups; as John Wesley called them, “class meetings.” Can you commit to a class meeting, to “do” theology, for 90 minutes once a week for 6 weeks? Will you practice community in a “class meeting” for just 9 out

of the 1,008 hours you have in a 6-week period? If you're willing to commit to a class meeting to practice theology and community I'll meet you there. If you're not in a small group community now, I invite you to write "class meeting" on the registration form next to your name, and I'll call you about it.

More about the relationship of the vine and branches from Jesus. This is about self-giving love: "If you live your life in Me, and My words live in your hearts, you can ask for whatever you like and it will come true for you. This is how My father will be glorified - in your becoming fruitful and being My disciples." This prayer Jesus talks about - asking for whatever you like and it will come true - is about discipleship, and not to be confused with Santa or Grandpa Bill, both of whom give you what you want to make you happy. When we are connected to Jesus (through prayer) and to each other (through small group communities) we understand better how to respond to the world's needs (self-giving love.) We better understand what our gifts are - the fruit of the vine - and how to use our gifts (our hands, our hearts, our brains, our finances, our talents, our time, our hobbies and interests) to bless and help others. We give of ourselves; again, this is the fruit of the vine, self-giving love, and it blesses and helps heal the world. Self-giving love is the fruit of discipleship that reveals the vine, Jesus.

The "ask for whatever you like" prayer is for guidance and wisdom so we know how to use the fruit grown in us from the life and strength of the vine (Jesus) so that God's love and mercy, and God's glory are revealed. At this table we remember and we experience again Jesus' self-giving love in the bread: His body broken for us, and in the cup: His blood spilled for the forgiveness of our sin. At this table we remember the Good Shepherd who gives us what we need: love and connection, community, and opportunities to be His hands and feet in the world.

*At this time I invite the Communion servers and the Visiting Stewards to come forward.*

We gather around Your Table, Lord, where the simple gifts of bread and cup are made sacred by the anointing of Your Spirit. And now as we eat, as we drink, and as we remember, let us pray as Jesus has taught us. Our Father...