

Series: I Am

I am the Vine

Sermon by Care Pastor Melonie Richards

John 15:1-5

Waterstone Community Church, Littleton, Colorado

Sunday morning, April 6, 2025

Jacque: A reading from John 15, verses one through 5: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit, He prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to. Remain in me as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself. It must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine. You are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit. Apart from me, you can do nothing,” the Word of the Lord.

Melonie: I am excited for what God has for us today. We get to look at his Word. I want to take you on a little journey this morning. Imagine with me that we are going to a winery. We are going to Sonoma, California. We go, and we see the branches, the rolling hills. The sun is shining. There are green leaves, luscious grapes popping out. A lot of work has gone into this winery, to this vineyard. Also, there are some branches that do not look so good. Maybe they are withering. They are dry. They are in the dirt. Typically, we do not see those on the tour. Those are not in the highlight reel. Today, we are going to talk about God’s vineyard. The great thing is, no matter what your branch condition is, He welcomes us into his vineyard, whether we feel like we are thriving, our faith is growing, whether we feel like we are dry and withered. Our spiritual life is much like the life of a branch, and thus we have John 15, where God says, “I am the vine, and you are the branches,” where Jesus says that.

I would like to take a moment and just pray. Father, we just pause. We pause in your presence. Jesus, we welcome you here. Come, Holy Spirit. We want to hear from you today. This is your living word. This is what you have spoken to us, so prepare the soil of our hearts. Help us to hear your word, what you want to say. Jesus, if you do not show up, we have nothing. It is about you and what you want to do. You are the true vine. We are the branches, and we surrender this morning. We want to hear from you. In your name, Jesus, amen.

So, as Josh so aptly read, John 15:1-5, we are going to do a deep dive into these verses. When Paul assigned me this passage, he gave me five verses, and I was excited, because we get to go deep, so if you have your Bibles, you might want to grab those. If you want to, look at the screens, but know that it is going to be a concentrated look at these five verses, and my hope this morning is that we’ll be encouraged in our connection to Christ, that we will really know He wants to connect with us, and what it is that helps us in that connection. The whole idea is spiritual sustainability.

Sustainability is a big topic right now. Environmental sustainability is important. A few weeks ago, we went to Germany. We get off the plane, and what do I see? I am looking at this big tower, and it says, what does it say? It says, “sustainable aviation fuel,” sustainable, sustainability. How do we sustain and connect with Jesus? So, we are doing a series on the “I am” statements. Hopefully you have been able to come and hear about who God is, “I am,” who Jesus says He is. Where is the first “I am” statement that we find in scripture? It is Exodus 3. It is in the Old Testament. It is when God comes to Moses.

Maybe you are familiar with Moses. Moses was born a Hebrew. He was adopted into an Egyptian family. In his anger, Moses murdered a man, and then he ran. He ran away. Moses ran to the wilderness. He ran what would be like four-hundred miles away from God. Moses is in the wilderness, tending sheep, and what happens? God invites him with curiosity. God invites Moses to speak to Him, to say who He is: "I am who I am." So that is the back story. Today we get to look at the last, "I am" statement. This is the last statement Christ is making before He goes to the cross, and in John 15, He says, "I am the true vine." He is about to die on the cross. These are his last words. I do not know about you, but to me, when people are dying, the last words seem important, so we want to really focus, digest them. What do they mean? He wants his disciples to fully grasp this idea. If we look back in John 14, Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." He is explaining the relationship between Him and the disciples, and then Philip asks him a question, and then Jesus says in John 14:9, "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you for such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." He wants them to know who He is. He wants them to be certain. He is about to leave. They are going to be without the vine. They are going to be without Jesus, and He is saying, "Who am I? You know who I am."

So often I think we can be like the disciples. We spend time with Jesus, and we read his word, but we do not feel close to Him, and we do not really know who He is, and maybe we are confused. I remember feeling this way when I was in graduate school. I actually wrote a paper on the silence of God. I felt so disconnected, even though I was at a Christian school. I was spending time in the word. So how do we have spiritual sustainability? It is in the connection, whether we feel it, or whether we do not, so let's jump into the passage, John 15. We are going to read it again. God's living word is breathing his breath to us. He says, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit," what does He do? "He prunes it, so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself. It must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine, and you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit. Apart from me, you can do," what? "Nothing."

All right, so verse one, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener." Let's look at this whole idea of vine and vineyard in scripture. We see it in our culture today, in wineries that we might visit, but it was very popular in Jesus' day. If we look into the scriptures, one commentator said there are two hundred references to this plant. It is an important plant. The stories throughout the Bible refer to vines and to vineyards. Don't you love that about Christ? He is taking what is common in their culture, and He is bringing it home to them and giving them that illustration. Israel was considered to be the vine at this point. The audience would be thinking, "the vine," and they would translate that to Israel, and Jesus is shifting that paradigm. He is saying, "I am the vine. I am the source. I am the one." God is symbolizing his care and his investment in his chosen people through this analogy. He states that the Father is the gardener. He is the vinedresser. He is the one that oversees this vineyard. Don't you think the overseer, the owner of a winery wants success for those branches and for that vineyard? I do not know if you were here a few weeks ago when Paul did the sermon, it was an intergenerational sermon on faith like a child, and he talked about the goodness of God. Do you believe in the goodness of God? Do you believe He is good? Do you believe He wants you to thrive? He does. That is his heart.

That being said, we look at the next verse, and it is a little bit hard to comprehend, right? What is the next verse, verse 2? “He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit, He prunes, so it will be even more fruitful.” That seems a little bit harsh. He is going to cut off. At first glance it seems harsh, but the word for, “cut off,” in Greek is the word, “airo,” and it can mean, “to take away,” or “to lift up.” This word translated, “taking up,” is also used in Matthew 14:20. This is when the disciples took up the baskets of the leftover food of feeding the five thousand. This word, “airo,” is also used in Matthew 27:32, when Simon was forced to take up the cross for Christ, so vine dressers at this time, they would carefully raise up the branches that were falling down, maybe caked with mud when it would rain. They would cautiously lift the branch, clean it, and tie it to a large rock, so that the branch could bathe in the sunlight. Don’t you love that, bathe in the sunlight? Why? So that it would have more probability for fruitfulness. Verse 2 says, “He cuts off every branch in me that does not bear fruit. While every branch that bears fruit, He prunes, so that it will be even more fruitful.” The deadness has to be removed in order for the vine to be healthy, and for the growth of fruit. Pruning is the cutting away of unnecessary parts for growth. It is a metaphor for spiritual growth for us today. That is how the plant grows. Pruning provides a way for spiritual sustainability. One commentator said, “Dead wood is worse than fruitfulness. Why? Dead wood can harbor disease or decay.” He goes on to say that God removes the dead wood from his church, and He disciplines believers, so that we can be directed to fruitful activity.

Pruning is painful. We do not like it. It hurts. I have one friend who says, “Do not discount your discomfort.” Do not discount your discomfort. Why? Because it provides a way for more fruit. What does pruning look like practically? In my life, I have had several seasons of pruning. One was very unexpected. It was when I was in my early twenties. I had married my high school sweetheart, and he decided, “I do not want to be married anymore, and I do not love you anymore,” and he divorced me. That was a deep season of pruning in my life. That was not my plan. That was not my plan for my future. I wanted to follow the instructions God had given regarding marriage. I wanted to marry this man. I wanted Him to bless it, to have this great Christian life. I really was following this playbook of A plus B equals C Christianity. God does not always work like that. I had claimed the verse, Jeremiah 29:11. He was going to give me good, and He was going to prosper me. The problem was I had forgotten what my Bible teacher in high school said, that context is king, and I think I took that scripture out of context to define good for myself. That verse actually is when Israel is in exile, and part of the Christian journey is suffering. He says that we will share in his suffering as well as his glory. So let me clarify, this pruning in my life was an invitation to deeper intimacy. Jesus was calling me deeper, to share in his suffering, and that is something that is worth the pruning. That is worth it. That is where we can draw near to Christ.

Let me clarify that there were days of depression. There was some anger. There were some ways I just did not understand, but the overall experience yielded an opportunity for me to draw near to Jesus in my suffering and the rejection that I felt. Where have you seen pruning in your life? Maybe it is that job that you were hoping to get, that you did not get. Maybe it is in a relationship that is not going well. Maybe your health is not doing so well, or maybe the pruning is not really a dramatic situation. Maybe it is a daily type of thing that needs cutting off. Maybe it is some rotten attitudes, unmanaged desires, or sinful habits, all of those things that quench the spiritual vitality and keep Christ from flowing through us.

I wonder what would it be like for us to actually invite pruning, to say, “Lord, where do you want to prune me? Where do you want to call me deeper? Where do you want to cut things off, so that I can have more intimacy, more connection, more sustainability with you?” Pruning seems counterintuitive. The cutting away is what brings the new life. It is done for the good of the plant, to bring more production. Sustainability in our spiritual walk comes through pruning. It is a surrendering. It is a trusting in God’s abundance. We are believing in his goodness and his generosity. We have faith that the pruning makes a way for growth that we cannot see yet. What if we could view it as an invitation, as a positive, instead of a judgment and a negative?

So, we have seen that Jesus is our vine, the Father is the vine dresser, and pruning is an important part of spiritual sustainability. The next aspect of spiritual sustainability we want to look at is in the presence and in the abiding. Verses 3 and 4: “You are already clean.” I love that part. “You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself. It must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.” So, verse three, “You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.” What does Jesus mean here, we are already clean? The Greek word here is called *katharos*, and it is actually the same one that Jesus used when He interacted with Peter at the Last Supper. Maybe you remember that Jesus went to wash the feet of the disciples. John 13:8 and 9: “‘No,’ said Peter. You shall never wash my feet.’ Jesus answered, ‘Unless I wash you, you have no part in me.’ ‘Then Lord,’ Simon Peter replied.” I just love this about Peter. What is he like? He is like, “No, then just not just my feet. Wash my hands. Wash my head.” Like, “wash all of me,” and Jesus answered, “Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet. The whole body is clean, and you are clean, though not every one of you.”

So, Jesus is letting them know they are cared for and cleansed branches. That is good news. They are in the Father’s vineyard. He has washed them. He has purified them. He has made them ready. They are ready to bear fruit, and the same is true for us. We have been declared righteous. Do we believe that our position is secure? That is our identity. That is who we are. We need our feet washed. Yeah, we need to confess. Have you discovered the joy of confession? Like we do not have to carry the burden. He washes our feet, a daily rhythm, a daily practice, washing our feet, but we have been declared clean.

Verse four reads, “Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself. It must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.” Jesus gives us the key to the fruitfulness in our spiritual walk. The spiritual sustainable sustainability comes from remaining in his presence, or we might say, connecting, connecting to his presence. Some say abiding, this is such a rich thing, to abide in Christ. The word “remain,” I love words. I love looking up words. I love definitions of words, so remaining means, “to continue to be present, to not depart, to be held, or to dwell.” I am going to read that one more time, “to continue to be present, to not depart, to be held, and to dwell.” Our spiritual sustainability comes from being in the presence of Jesus. The priority is being in the presence of the source. Kingdom fruit flows from being present with Him. There is an attachment. We are attached to the vine, and it freely flows through us. The fruit happens when the branch is attached to the vine and continues to be attached, to receive the nutrients. The fruit is the overflow of the connection to the vine.

So, if you are walking through a winery, through a vineyard, what do you hear? I will tell you one thing you do not hear. You do not hear the vine grunting and groaning, trying to pop out the fruit. They

are not working hard. They are receiving the nutrients, and that is flowing out and bringing the fruit. They are not working hard to pop that fruit out. They are just receiving. The attachment to the source is what brings about the fruit. What does it mean to have a continual connection to Christ? Notice here that Jesus uses the word “remain,” which is a verb. This is a choice that we have. This is intentional. We get to choose to remain. We get to make that choice. So how do we do that?

Practically, I would like to give three soil cultivators, ways we cultivate our heart to connect to Jesus, our vine. The first one is God’s word. In preparing for this talk, I have taken a little survey of people: “How do you connect to Christ?” Do you know what most people have said? God’s word, being in God’s word. Scripture is what feeds our soul. It is our spiritual food. Regular reading of God’s word brings us a knowledge about who God is and about what He wants for us. Oftentimes, I think we read scripture, asking ourselves, “How does it apply to me? What is in it for me? It is about me.” I think God is calling us to take a different set of glasses and to say, “What is this saying about God? What is He saying? What is his story in this?” Scripture helps us to know who Jesus is, our vine, and what He wants us to be about. We gain glimpses into his heart through stories of the Bible, and how fortunate are we here in America that we have a written word, a Bible, that we can read? We can turn the pages. We can look at it on our phone. We have the knowledge on how to read it. We have the resources to actually have it. Do we cherish it?

There are times when it is hard to read the scriptures. Maybe you have been in those seasons. For me, one of those was in grief. There is a real thing called grief brain, where your brain just does not comprehend, and you cannot read. There are seasons when you have young children, and you are parenting, and life is really busy, and it is hard to focus. There are seasons when maybe you have a work project. How do you stay connected in those seasons?

I think there are creative ways to do that. I think the Bible app, maybe you have used the Bible app, but you can play it, so when our son died in March of 2020, and my brain was not working, and I was struggling to understand Jesus, and I was struggling to connect, I would just play the Bible app, play through the Psalms. The Psalms is one of the great spaces when you are lamenting or you don’t understand, just soaking in the Psalms. Maybe it is a passage, maybe it is one verse, but staying in the word is our spiritual sustenance. That is what feeds our souls. So do not skip it. It is like physical food. We eat multiple times a day. What about spiritual food? Are you feeding your spirit? Are you feeding your soul? Even if it is dry toast, we eat it. It is important.

Let’s look at Jesus’ example. I always want to look at the true vine. I want to look to Jesus. What is the example He sets for us? Jesus knew scripture. He had it memorized. This is the living word of God, and yet He memorized scripture and recited it, and if we look at Matthew 4:4, this is when Jesus has gone into the wilderness. He is at his lowest point. He has fasted for forty days, and He knows that scripture is most important. It is his weapon. In Matthew 4:4, Jesus gives us clear instructions. He says, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” Did you know that is a quote? That is a quote of an Old Testament scripture. We see it when He is suffering on the cross. Think about that. He is physically tortured, emotionally drained, spiritually weak, and yet He is quoting scripture. He quotes Psalm 22:1: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” I think if Jesus knew, read, and memorized scripture, then maybe we should too.

I find it hard at times. I find that accountability helps, and intentionality helps. As we see in the life of Jesus, the word of God is our sword. It is our weapon. It is our sustenance, so we see God's word is a way to cultivate our sustainability as well as community.

The second soil cultivator, we have a relational God. Think about it. Back in the very beginning it was God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit. When we look in Genesis, and we see Adam and Eve, they are walking with God in the garden, walking. It is a relationship. It is community. Here in John 15, we see Jesus as the vine. God is the Father, and we are the branches, so what is the opposite of community? Isolation, right? So, we have been watching this survival show called *Alone*. Has anyone seen that show? I have been watching *Alone*. I personally do not know why anyone would do this, but there is a monetary reward. They take people, and they put them in the hardest conditions, Antarctica. It is cold. They have to build shelter, they have to find their own food, and there is no one around. They have to do their own camera videoing of themselves. They are completely alone, thus the name of the show, and it is interesting to me to watch these folks when there is no other living person near them for days on end. They do not thrive. They start deteriorating emotionally. You can see it happen. That is because God has made us for community. He is a communal, triune God. Oftentimes we can get hurt in community, and I think a lot of times we tend to cancel community at that point. What if the healing that we need only takes place in community?

Hebrews gives us some instruction on this idea. Hebrews 10:24 and 25 says, "and let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds, not giving up, not canceling meeting together, as some of you are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another all the more as you see the day approaching." I want to say good job on being here this morning. You are being here in community, right? You are receiving. You are nurturing your sustainability. Online, we invite you to come back to be in the presence. It is important.

My next soil, I keep saying that wrong, soil cultivator, soil cultivator is prayer, and this one is near and dear to my heart, prayer. Prayer is about continual conversation. Prayer is about relationship. Oftentimes we think, "How does prayer work?" and we make it more transactional. Prayer is really about a relationship. Oftentimes we think we have to sit in a certain place. We have to say certain words. Prayer is about relating to God, relating to Jesus, relating to the Spirit. It is about relationship. What are some fertilizers we can put into our soil to make our prayer life more vibrant? I think we start with desire. We need to pause for a moment and ask ourselves, "Do we really desire a connection? Do we want to be in relationship with Jesus? Do we want to bear fruit from his kingdom?" If we are honest, there are times we do not want to connect. We do not want the pruning. We do not want to be in his presence. We do not care about kingdom fruit.

I think we are in good company, if you look throughout the scriptures. You see Moses running away. You see Jonah running away. You see Martha not wanting to sit at the feet of Jesus. I think we are in good company. The thing is, God is always pursuing us. His heart is so good. He wants connection. He wants a relationship. Spiritual sustainability starts with a desire to connect to the vine. Maybe you are in that space where you do not want to connect. Why not ask God, "Lord, help me to connect"? Pray a prayer of connection and desire, that He might increase that.

A second cultivator, fertilizer, would be to diminish distraction. Do any of you have distractions in your life? I know for me one of the main distractions, my phone. How easy is it for us just to pick up our phone and see what is happening, to want to know what is happening in the world or social media? I need to tell myself, “Stop the scroll, and feed my soul,” because a lot of times, our phones are empty calories. They are not feeding our spirit. I have to admit that in preparing this message, I was tempted to become distracted. I was tempted to use my phone. I am not saying it is always bad, but when it is distracting from connecting with Jesus. I discovered something. There is a little button on the side of it. Do you know what it is? It is turning it off. How often do you turn your phone off? Are you allowed to turn your phone off? Can God speak to you outside of having your phone on? I believe you can, so I just want to encourage you and myself, let’s put our phones down, stop the scroll, and feed our souls. It robs us of relationship, not just with God, but also with each other, right?

Our third fertilizer is dependence. Dependence is a key in relationship with God. Let’s read verse four and five again. Once again, we are going to dig into the word. We are going to keep reading it, read it over and over: “Remain in me, and I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself. It must remain. It must choose to be in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine, and you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing.” We can do nothing of kingdom impact, outside of Jesus, on a very basic level. The breath that we have is from Jesus. I take my breath for granted so often. We can do nothing without Him. I think oftentimes we have our own version of this idea. We want to say my version: “I am the vine. I am the source, and Jesus is the branch. He is secondary. It is about me, and He needs to meet my needs.” Let’s not be confused. The Biblical version, which by the way, He says this twice in five verses, twice in five verses. It must be important. The Biblical version is, “I am the vine, and you are the branches.”

So, we have seen that prayer is a continual conversation, that we need a desire. We need to diminish distractions. We need dependence. Prayer is also a continual listening. It is not just giving God this laundry list of the things that He needs to do for me. “I have it figured out, Lord. This is how you want to solve the problem. This is what you need to do. This is how you can work my circumstances out so that I can be comfortable, I can be safe, I can be at ease.” When I pray that way, I am not praying his glory to be made known. I am not praying, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.” I am really praying selfishly. I am praying for what I want. I am not listening. I am telling. Prayer is receiving, so that we can listen. We have received from the vine the words, the nutrients, the things He has given to us.

I have recently been impacted by two questions. These are taken from Jamie Winship. Maybe you have heard of them, but they have really impacted my life. The first one is, “What do I need to know?” This idea can be applied to every aspect of our lives. What do I need to know? We pause for a moment, our everyday life. We are at work. We do not know what we should be doing. We say, “Lord, what do I need to know?” I will give a shout out to my mom, who trained me in this very well. When I was young, and I would lose things, which, I tend to lose things quite often, and she would say to me, “Have you prayed about that?” It really irritated me, but the thing that it did was it trained me to stop and pray: “Lord, where are my keys? I can’t find them. Could you show me?” because He is a God who knows things. Jesus is smart, and He wants to tell us things.

The second question is, “What do I need to do? Jesus, what do I need to do about this? I do not know.” Jamie Winship was a police officer. He was in law enforcement for many years. He used these questions his whole career. His stories are quite amazing and supernatural, if you are looking for some good storytelling. He would not know something, and it was humanly impossible to know that, and God would show him, because God was his informant. He can continue to be connected to the vine. He is able to direct us. Why do we not ask him more? So, we see that prayer is that continual connection, that relationship. We see that prayer is listening. All of this is so important to our spiritual sustainability.

I have to stop for a minute, because I forgot one of my illustrations that I love. We are now in a season of gardening, right? All the gardeners, this beautiful plant, this is a more everyday illustration for us. This is what we want to look like. This is what God calls us to be, flourishing, to have fruit, to have vines. This is what comes through reading his word. This is what comes through being in community. This is what comes through prayer, nurturing, vitality. When we are not doing these things, we look like this; wilted, dead, not alive. I want to let you know that if you go to Walmart, and you buy a dead plant, they do not really give you a discount. I did get ninety cents off, but they do not give you a discount, but this is what we look like when we are not connected to the vine. This is what we look like when we are not in God’s word, when we are not praying, when we are not in community. This is not what God has for us, church. He wants us to thrive, so that his kingdom will come to bear. We can be his hands, his feet. We can serve Him. We can bear fruit. It is not just for us, it is for the whole church, the whole kingdom. As you look at plants, and you see them wilting, think about that. Think about how God wants to nurture you. He wants to be our nutrients, our nourishment, our source. He wants spiritual sustainability for us.

So, in summary, spiritual sustainability requires pruning. Pruning is essential for spiritual health. Spiritual sustainability cannot happen without connecting to the vine. It is in his presence where we can abide. We can hear Him. Spiritual sustainability involves prayer, a continual connection to the vine. Don’t you just love that about Jesus that He wants to connect to us? He wants us to grow. He does not want us to stay stuck in the mud. It is out of his goodness, out of his love. If you go on in the rest of that chapter, John 15, it talks about love. It is out of God’s love. He invites us into his presence. He is not some impersonal force like the universe. That is not who He is. He is personal. He is close. He wants to be with us. He wants continual connection.

As we think about connecting to the true vine, to Jesus, I encourage you to water yourself. Water yourself, so you can look like the thriving plant. Be in God’s word. What is the way that you can have more intake of his word? Is it through listening? Is it through journaling? Is it through writing? Is it through speaking it to one another? Is it through prayer? I love praying God’s word. He loves hearing his word. Maybe you have never connected to Jesus. Maybe you are not a part of the true vine. Maybe now is the time to ask Him to be your source. All you need is a simple prayer of acknowledging Jesus, asking Him, telling Him, you listening to Him, connecting with Him. So, wherever we are in our walk, Jesus wants to be our true vine. He wants to connect with us. Spiritual sustainability comes through connecting to Jesus, the true vine.

36:10 minutes

Edited by Tom Kenaston

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