

August 24th: The Living Vine

Welcome, my friends, to our summer sermon series on the Fruits of the Spirit–this is a way for us to explore some big questions about what it means to be disciples of Jesus in our modern world. Now that we’ve studied all nine fruits together, we’ll be taking the next two weeks to wrap up all of these thoughts and conclude this series with some final words of inspiration and action. Today we’re talking about being connected to the living vine of Jesus, so thank you for continuing to walk with us on this journey and I hope that something connects with you so that you can begin a new week with fresh insight.

Let’s take a moment to pray before we begin.

Living Vine, when we remain connected to you, we receive all the nourishment that we need. When we remain connected to you, we are fed by your wisdom and encouragement, so that we can live as you have intended for us. When we remain connected to you, we are guided towards a faith that is lifegiving and purposeful. During these moments of meditation, we look for your presence among us, so that we can maintain our bond with you and grow as disciples. In this time of worship, may we sense your deep and abiding love for us, and may we affirm our commitment to living as loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle and self aware people. Amen.

Imagine you have a friend who lives on the other side of the country, or even the other side of the world. Maybe you grew up together or went to school together, but you haven’t lived in the same place for decades. At first you exchanged birthday and Christmas cards, but now months or even years will go by without any letters. You don’t talk on the phone, or text, or email, but you follow each other on Facebook, so you get periodic updates about their lives, and you assume that they see your occasional posts. You don’t really know what is going on with them these days, and you haven’t shared what you’re going through either–they don’t know about your recent diagnosis or health scare, and you don’t know about their latest grandchild or vacation. You

don't know their current challenges, and they don't know what TV show you're watching these days.

In this imaginary scenario, how connected to them do you feel? How much do you feel like you can rely on them for emotional support? Could you call them in an emergency? And lastly, what does this friendship mean to you?

I ask these questions because today we're going to be talking about what it means to be connected—and what kind of effort goes into maintaining the important connections in our lives, including the spiritual connections that allow us to live out our faith in meaningful ways.

We'll get back to that in a minute—but first, a little recap.

If you've been with us over the past nine weeks, you know that we've unpacked each of the Fruits of the Spirit that Paul lists in his letter to the Galatians. Week by week, we've gone through these qualities and virtues, learning more about how to embody them in our own spiritual journeys. We've asked big questions, listened to prophetic words from leaders like Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, Mister Rogers, and C.S. Lewis, and we've worked through some misconceptions that our culture might have about these fruits of the spirit. We've been challenged to see our own behavior and patterns differently, and invited into a different way of being human that builds up ourselves and our communities with justice and liberation.

All of that is important, and I'm so glad we had those conversations. I hope they've been as helpful for you as they've been for us to think through and apply. But I wanted to continue this series on spiritual fruit with a reminder about where these virtues grow from—because none of this is possible without a connection to something larger—a connection that we might be tempted to neglect, just like it can be tempting to neglect our friendships or family relationships. Specifically, I want us to think more deeply about what it means to stay connected to Jesus—the person who our scripture calls the “Living Vine.”

But where does this language of “Living Vine” come from? Well, in the Gospel of John, we have this extended conversation between Jesus and his disciples—it happens after their final Passover meal together, and after Jesus has washed their feet as an act of love and sacrifice. This is all occurring just hours before Jesus is betrayed, put to trial, and then killed—so this topic of spiritual fruit was clearly important enough to him that he felt like he had to share it in these final moments together.

Here’s how he starts in chapter 15:

“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 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; 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. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”

Like in Paul’s teaching about the fruit of the Spirit, Jesus is leaning on an agrarian metaphor here—a way of understanding a concept that is relevant to the agricultural lifestyle of this time period. The farmers, vineyard workers, fishermen, and shepherds would have understood this vine imagery, it would have felt tangible to them. Now, we might not be farmers or vineyard workers, or fishermen or shepherds, but here in the Pacific Northwest, we probably don’t have to look too far to find vines of our own. We have vineyards in Woodinville and Chelan, we have incredible National and State Parks at our fingertips, and many of you probably have dealt with plants in your own yard that require quite a bit of taming and trimming. So I don’t think it should be

too difficult for us to understand what Jesus is talking about when he describes vines and branches that are all interconnected.

But even more than this image of being woven together as vines and branches, Jesus has some specific instructions for his disciples, and by extension, all of us. Twice in this little speech, Jesus talks about this idea of “remaining” in him. First he says, “remain in me, as I also remain in you.” And then later he reminds the disciples, “If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers...if you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”

Before we get into what Jesus is saying, there’s some subtext here that I think is important. In chapter 14, Jesus tells his friends that he will be leaving them soon—there have been multiple instances over the past few chapters where Jesus predicts his own death. In each of these conversations, the disciples seem to be confused about this prediction—but Jesus is clear: his time on earth is coming to an end. There will be a time in the near future when Jesus is no longer there to lead and guide his friends. They will need to step up and be leaders for the next generation of disciples. They will need to remember all that he has taught them, because they will be in charge of teaching other people about him.

With Jesus gone, what exactly does it mean to “remain” in him? What does it mean to have his words “remain” in us?

Well, I think this might have been slightly easier for the early disciples, who knew Jesus personally—they were deeply connected to him on an intimate level. They knew what he looked like, and how his voice sounded, and if he got cranky after too many hours without a snack. They knew his laugh, his favorite places to talk and camp, and how he prayed with them. And so this concept of remaining with him is more intuitive—remaining close with someone is natural when you have memories to hold onto, specific moments that you can recall, or even tokens from them to remember them by.

But it’s harder for us—it’s harder for modern day Christians in general because we’ve never met Jesus in the flesh, and I don’t know that we will ever meet him

that way while we're on earth. We are so far removed from the world of first century Palestine, our lives look nothing like the man that we claim to follow. We haven't walked the same roads, or eaten the same foods, or shared in a festival together. We only have these secondhand accounts to rely on, and it can be tricky to figure out how to be faithful in a culture that is nothing like the one Jesus is talking to.

So our big question as disciples is this: how are we supposed to stay connected to Jesus? How are we supposed to remain part of the Living Vine?

To answer that, let's go back to the scenario that we imagined back at the beginning of our time together—and the friend we might have grown disconnected from. If you wanted to get in touch with them and rebuild your relationship, what would you do? Would you call them? Set a date for a Facetime so that you could catch up? Travel to see them if you could? Would you follow up every couple of weeks until it felt totally natural to see their name come up on your phone, or send letters often enough that your conversations got deeper and deeper? Would you take a few moments each day to send them a meme on Instagram that you think they would like?

If we do these kinds of things, little by little, we might feel our bond growing. We might feel like we've had a shared experience, something we can each hold onto. We might remember what we have in common, or watch the same TV show and compare notes, or we might figure out that we still laugh at all the same jokes. We might discover we have similar values, and the same dreams for the future, or a combined passion for a certain cause. And then, we might feel like the friend on the other side of the country or world is actually right there with us, because we've been intentional about closing the gap between our different experiences.

I think the same can be true of our relationship with Jesus. Even though we might be separated by many factors and realities, there are ways that we can rekindle our friendship if it's feeling stale or if we feel disconnected from our faith. Just like with our human friendships, our spiritual ones take some intentionality and effort. You can start by dedicating a few minutes each day to

prayer, or practicing a spiritual discipline, or by reading passages from the four Gospels. In these moments of conversation and contemplation, you can listen for what God might be saying to you, or what wisdom might apply to your current circumstances. You can take some time to remember what you've learned in this series and live it out in your daily life. You can find a ministry that allows you to use your gifts, or start one that gives you an opportunity to learn something new about our neighbors. You can join a small group that connects you to a greater purpose or better sense of community. You can give your time or treasures to local organizations that embody the kind of world you want to live in.

And most importantly of all, if you desire to be closer to Jesus, you can focus on knowing and showing love. In Mark 12, when Jesus is questioned by the teachers of the law about what the most important commandment is, he answers, “‘The most important one,’ answered Jesus, ‘is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

These commands might not have been on the top of the disciples' minds as they prepared to say goodbye to Jesus, but Jesus doesn't want them to forget these important teachings. In their final moments together, Jesus reminds them that the thing that will keep them most connected is love—real, tangible, life changing love. Jesus looks at his friends, holds their hands in his own, and says this:

“If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.”

My friends, and friends of our Living Vine, I know that our faith journeys can sometimes feel disjointed and chaotic, and there is so much that threatens to keep us disconnected from God and each other. Our lives are more turbulent and confusing than ever. So as you finish your summer, as you tackle new challenges, or are overwhelmed by chronic anxieties, I invite you to identify one or two ways that you're going to maintain this divine connection. Pick a couple of practices or spiritual activities that will help you remember Jesus' love for you and love for our world, and give yourself some dedicated time this week to grow in your faith.

And when it comes to our relationships with each other, Jesus does not want us to forget that loving God and loving each other as we love ourselves is the best way that we can stay connected. The love that remains between us equips us to remain with our loving Jesus, so let's find a way to grow that love this week.

Amen.