

Interwoven Branches, Abiding in Love

Sermon by Pastor Patrick Fish

John 15:1-8

April 28-29, 2018

Easter 5

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

—John 15:1-5 (NRSV)

Grace & Peace to you from God, who is love. Whose love casts out fear.
Who abides in you. Amen.

Move 1: Jesus connects imagery of the past to speak to life in the present

Last week, we had the beautiful imagery of Good Shepherd, of Jesus reminding us that mercy is behind us and hope is front of us. That he is with us in the present, reorienting us, walking with us on that road.

We live into that and “be” shepherds of God, knowing God will bring us to calm waters.

Jesus borrowed the image of shepherd from the Old Testament and brought it to life for how we live and apply faith to our lives.

Today, we have this wonderful imagery of the vine, an image often used in the Old Testament to describe the relationship between God and God’s people. Constantly throughout the Old Testament, God is described as the “vinegrower,” caring and tending the vine. And the “vine” are God’s people who bear fruit when they walk in justice—and don’t, when injustice and indifference are thriving.

Jesus again connects imagery from the past to speak life in the present. To describe the intimate and close relationship God desires. To reveal the truth that all are in God's family.

Back in Jesus' day, vineyards were very important to Israel's agricultural life. People would know how much work it took to prepare the ground, the years it would take, the patience and skill needed for vines to become fruitful. [1]

Today, you can go to Binny's or Jewel, walk into the wine section, and choose from countless bottles. It's almost overwhelming. It's easy to gloss over and not realize all that goes into that bottle ending up on that shelf in that store. We take it for granted. We don't stop to reflect on the process and love that went into that bottle being made.

Personally, I love the wine bottles that have a story on their label, telling how their vineyards came to be, about the different grapes that came together to make *this* wine. It fascinates me: the time, the precision, the skill. It's truly remarkable.

Jesus brings this precise and methodical model of tending the vine to life for us, and relates it to who Jesus is and who we are. This intimate, loving, and fruitful relationship is what God intends and desires for all of us.

Today we reflect on this imagery—the vine, branches, fruit, and vinegrower—and pull out what this tells us about God and how it helps us live out our faith in everyday life.

Move 2: Jesus is the Vine. We are the Branches.

Right off the bat in today's Gospel reading, Jesus deviates from the borrowed image of the vine. In the Old Testament, God is the vinegrower who tends, cares, and cleanses the vine. The vine is God's people, Israel. And God is constantly tending and pruning his people with shaky and unsustainable results.

Who is the vine according to Jesus? Israel? God's people? No, it's *him*. Jesus is the true vine. Notice that detail, the pivot that Jesus makes. [2]

God, the Father, is still the vinegrower, but Jesus is the vine. He intercedes for us. He is our source of life. He is our source of love. He is our source of nourishment now.

God still prunes and cleanses. Still does a precision balancing act, ensuring we have enough water, enough light, enough shade. Tending the soil so that the vine can flourish, so the branches can thrive.

If Jesus takes on the role of vine, who are we then? We no longer are the vine, only dependent on ourselves. *We are now the branches.* Branches who are always attached to the vine. Who are always and forever dependent on him.

We are the branches meant to abide, to remain and dwell in Christ. To continue always in his presence.

As the branches, we are exposed to the elements, to the different seasons, to light and darkness. And because of that, our branches need pruning. [3]

God tends to that precise process, pruning us from our dead branches. Not in a way to punish us. Not in a way to cause us pain. But done in a way to stimulate and create new growth. Done to create new life.

Pruning not to destroy us, but to lift us up. Not to condemn us, but to help us redirect, re-center, and reorient our lives again. To abide in him. To rely in him. To bear fruit and carry out God's work.

No branch is done growing. No branch is above another. We are all interwoven together as a web, as one united root system.[4] All of us abide in Christ and all of us bear the responsibility of bearing fruit.

That's where I think the imagery of the vine really speaks beautifully and pointedly.

Theologian Gale O'Day reminds us:

In a vine, branches are completely indistinguishable from one another. It is impossible to determine where one branch stops and another branch starts. All run together as they grow out of the central vine. There is no hierarchy because all belong to the same vine. All are tended by the same vinegrower. There is no status. [5]

The vine, the branches, and the vinegrower. What an incredible image to describe our interwoven, connected lives.

We are the branches. Who abide in Christ. Whose only condition is to bear fruit, which is to love as Christ first loved us. Which is to put our faith into action.

Move 3: Bearing Fruit

As branches, our source of life comes from the vine. From Jesus' perfect love that casts out fear. From his well that never stops feeding us.

The world may stress accolades and achievements, but we know our faith is founded in the vine. In Christ. Our source of life doesn't come from our fruits, from our works, from what we accomplish. Fruits come out of our faith.

Theologian Meda Stamper points out, "Branches don't live off their fruit. Fruit is meant to be shared. It's meant to be for someone else." [6]

We aren't defined by how much fruit we produce. Those that produce a lot aren't loved more by God. Those that produce less aren't loved less. We are all loved. Period.

God's love doesn't depend on us, on our worthiness, on us deciding to believe, on us measuring up. God sends light and showers love down upon us whether we deserve it or not. [7]

We don't force bearing fruit. As Stamper says, we don't squeeze it out of ourselves. We bear fruit because we abide in the true vine, because our vinegrower is good. We bear fruit not for self, but for others. We do it because we are extensions of the true Son and the one God. [8]

Move 4: Faithful, not successful

When I graduated seminary, I was all eager. Pumped to put everything into practice. Ready to achieve, accomplish, put that expensive education into use to grow the declining church. My goal was to be successful. Make a difference.

Three years later. I'm a different leader. Humbled. Because this is way harder than one idea. Way harder than one person can do. Way harder than one program can fix.

Today's scripture reminds me: I, like you, am called not to save, but to be a shepherd. Not to achieve, but to abide.

No longer am I about being successful. Now, I am about being *faithful*. When I am faithful, I am abiding in Christ. And when I abide, fruit comes.

Friends, I hope you, like me, want to change the world. Transform hurt to hope. Stand against injustice and indifference. Put our faith into action.

But we are reminded: Everything starts in God's Word. Dwelling in Christ. Staying faithful to him. I don't do this alone. You don't either. We do it together. Together, as the interwoven branches, indistinguishable from one another. Abiding in his love. Together, we bear fruit so the world can experience God.

Amen.

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- [1] "Love Abides," *Seasons of the Spirit*. SeasonsFUSION Lent Easter 2018. Wood Lake Publishing Inc, 2017.
- [2] Osvaldo Vena, "Commentary on John 15:1-8." www.workingpreacher.org, April 29, 2018.
- [3] "Love Abides," *Seasons of the Spirit*. SeasonsFUSION Lent Easter 2018. Wood Lake Publishing Inc, 2017.
- [4] "Love Abides," *Seasons of the Spirit*. SeasonsFUSION Lent Easter 2018. Wood Lake Publishing Inc, 2017.
- [5] Gale O'Day, cited by Meda Stamper, "Commentary on John 15:1-8." www.workingpreacher.org, May 3, 2015.
- [6] Meda Stamper, "Commentary on John 15:1-8." www.workingpreacher.org, May 3, 2015.
- [7] Judith Jones. "Commentary on 1 John 4:7-21," www.workingpreacher.org, May 3, 2015.
- [8] Meda Stamper, "Commentary on John 15:1-8," www.workingpreacher.org, May 3, 2015.

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