John 15:1-8

Jesus the True Vine

1‘I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower.2He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes\* to make it bear more fruit.3You have already been cleansed\* by the word that I have spoken to you.4Abide 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.5I 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.6Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.7If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.8My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become\* my disciples.

**Where Is Jesus?**

I hated gardening as a child. I had grown up in the suburbs where food came from supermarkets and involved the simple exchange of money for goods. When I was nine, my family moved to the country, to rural Virginia, where my father taught me that if you plant a seed, and water it and fertilize it, and pull the weeds from around it, and tend to it in ninety degree weather under the hot sun when the humidity is ninety-nine percent and deer flies are harassing you, it will produce fruit. I thought it was much simpler to get fruit from the air conditioned supermarket. Besides you couldn’t grow Oreos or Dr. Pepper.

Besides learning how much work was involved in raising crops, I learned about certain plants. The prior owner, a retired Navy captain, had a vineyard. He was an amateur winemaker, and he had imported varieties of grape vines from Europe and produced a variety of wines. While my older brother took a greater interest in making wine, I learned about pruning the grape vines. Each year I would travel up and down the rows of vines, clipping the long branches. I learned that if you don’t prune your grape vines, the vine can’t produce that many grapes. If all the energy of the plant is spent on longer and longer branches, you end up with long branches but little fruit. *The most fruitful branches were those that grew nearest the vine. The further from the vine, the less fruit was produced.*

In fact the branches that grow closest to the vine are hard to distinguish from the vine. So often I referred to some branches as vines.



Jesus would have been quite familiar with grapevines, growing up in farmland, and in today’s gospel reading he uses the grapevine in order to his relationship to us. “I am the vine. You are the branches.” A branch that is cut off from the vine produces no fruit. A branch that grows too far from the vine produces little fruit. Most of the fruit grows from the part of the branch that is closest to the vine, and the branches that are the closest to the vine are nearly indistinguishable from the vine. It’s simple, but important to understand this. Jesus says that “apart from me, you can do nothing.”

That’s an extreme statement, isn’t it? “Apart from me, you can do nothing.” Do you believe that? As Christians, you must remember that you are new beings. You’re different from the person you used to be, and you’re different from the person who finds no need for religion. You should be able to say as Paul says, “I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer me who lives but Christ who lives within me.” You should understand completely what Jesus meant when he said, “Lest a person be born again he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”

I think a lot of Christians believe deep, deep down in their soul that they are new beings. I believe that many of you do feel different, that you recognize that you’re different. But at the same time you feel a little frustrated, suffocated. We live in a culture and time where declaring ourselves “Christian” paints us as uncultured, superstitious, or just ignorant by folks who don’t share our faith. We would rather identify ourselves as “Methodist” or “Lutheran” or “Presbyterian,” thus making us seem more intellectual by implying that our doctrine is what matters more than Christ dwelling within us. It makes us seem like less of a threat to others. It makes us seem less aggressive, less arrogant. But it makes us less attentive to the Christ within us and more focused on being liked, on trying to appeal to people by making our message less offensive to the point where we’re not even clear what our message is and we forget that we are a new being, empowered by the Spirit of God to reign in the kingdom of God, a kingdom founded upon God’s love. We forget that Jesus was offensive to some, rejected by many, yet clear in his message, so clear that he upset a lot of people. To declare yourself a Christian is not an act of arrogance, nor is it an act of intolerance. It is simply declaring that Christ dwells within us. We have redefined “Christian” as one who holds certain opinions about who the man Jesus of Nazareth really was instead of it’s true definition as “one who abides in Christ and in whom Christ abides.”

And we have defined a fruitful as growing in church membership. But if we look at how Paul defines the “fruit of the spirit,” we find qualities like “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). This is the fruit that we bear when Christ abides in us and we in him.

I heard a story on National Public Radio on Monday that just begged to be used in this sermon. A United Methodist pastor of a church in Florida had traveled to Bethesda, MD to an American Atheist’s convention where she publicly announced that she was an atheist. Of course she couldn’t preach in her church after her announcement went “viral,” and local news stations were running the story, not that she wanted to – in fact she confessed that for years she had dreaded having to give sermons on Sunday because of the struggle she was having with her faith. She was afraid to go back to her church and mentioned that she was upset with a lot of the emails she was getting. I believe that it relates to our church and every church around the world. Furthermore I think it relates perfectly to today’s gospel reading about remaining close to the vine.

First, let me put your mind at ease; I am going to tell you today that I am an atheist. But as I mentioned last week, an atheist who rejects a false god is closer to the true God than someone who believes in a false god. I want to repeat that: an atheist who rejects a false god is closer to the true God than someone who believes in a false god. I believe that many a church has moved so far away from the true vine that they no longer have a clear vision of Christ. And when the god that the people are worshiping proves to be a false god, it is good that some reject this false god, even if it means they reject *all* gods for awhile. I don’t believe that this pastor has become separated from Christ; I just believe her vision is so obscured by so many distractions and distortions that may be endemic of the whole church that she has temporarily lost sight of the real Christ. Joe Bruckman, the guy who’s cleaning up the church lot behind the parsonage was talking with me on Friday, and he was very excited about something he noted as he was cleaning up the lot. He came upon a dead tree, nothing but a trunk and dead branches. And when he knocked over the trunk, he said that the outer part of the trunk just disintegrated when he was knocking it down, but he said that at the very center of the trunk, there was something like a rubber tube. It was flexible, and it ran all the way up the trunk and out to some of the dead limbs. This was the core of the tree, the last living part of it. It was still flexible; the living roots were still able to bring water and nutrients up that trunk and to some of the branches. Was the tree dead? It couldn’t produce fruit or flowers, yet it was struggling to survive. To me this presents a very hopeful image. Though a church may be dying, may not be bearing any fruit, Christ is still feeding it. His whole purpose is to feed the church in order that the church can produce fruit, the fruit within us that will witness the living Christ to those around us. A church may seem to be dying, may not be producing any fruit, but Christ, the true vine, is still feeding those branches trying to keep them alive so that they may someday produce fruit once again.

Have we gone off track?” To use the grapevine metaphor once again, “Have we grown too far away from the true vine?” Most people go through a certain process in their relationship with a church. Most begin with baptism, and you don’t remember too much about that. The next thing you remember are those long boring stretches when you had to sit still in the pews as your parents listened to someone speaking words that you couldn’t or wouldn’t understand (and maybe they couldn’t understand either). Then you remember Sunday school vaguely, confirmation vaguely, then you were freed from the church, then a little involvement in college, then marriage, then the baptism of your own children along with church shopping, looking for the right place to attend. You wanted a service that was roughly an hour long and you wanted to be with people that were nice, friendly, with similar interests. Does this sound familiar to any of you? If this does sound familiar, I will challenge you to tell me, *where is Jesus in all of this?* Are you a branch that has grown too far from the vine? It’s quite possible, for churches to function quite well by all appearances, but be too far from the true vine.

We are not God, but when Christ abides in us and we in him, we will do things and say things that will be criticized as too bold, too radical because God is bold and God is radical. And the reason we can behave so boldly and radically is because our qualification does not come from us but from God. His spirit inhabits us, and that Spirit is fully God himself. It’s not a tranquil Spirit. The Spirit is all of God’s power, a power that enables us to say and do things that we could never do by our own power. That Spirit is intent on building God’s kingdom in this world, and you and I are called to the highest vocation of all, to be builders of that kingdom, built upon the truth of God’s forgiveness and love. It’s a spirit that leads us to pray and strengthens our bonds with God through prayer.

Do you feel different? Do you feel like you are attached to the true vine? Does Christ abide in you as you abide in him? Are you bearing fruit in your daily life?