

Judges 7:2-9

² The Lord said to Gideon, 'The troops with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand. Israel would only take the credit away from me, saying, "My own hand has delivered me." ³Now therefore proclaim this in the hearing of the troops, "Whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return home." ' Thus Gideon sifted them out; ⁴ twenty-two thousand returned, and ten thousand remained.

⁴ Then the Lord said to Gideon, 'The troops are still too many; take them down to the water and I will sift them out for you there. When I say, "This one shall go with you", he shall go with you; and when I say, "This one shall not go with you", he shall not go.' ⁵So he brought the troops down to the water; and the Lord said to Gideon, 'All those who lap the water with their tongues, as a dog laps, you shall put to one side; all those who kneel down to drink, putting their hands to their mouths, ⁶ you shall put to the other side.' ⁶The number of those that lapped was three hundred; but all the rest of the troops knelt down to drink water. ⁷Then the Lord said to Gideon, 'With the three hundred that lapped I will deliver you, and give the Midianites into your hand. Let all the others go to their homes.' ⁸So he took the jars of the troops from their hands, ⁹ and their trumpets; and he sent all the rest of Israel back to their own tents, but retained the three hundred. The camp of Midian was below him in the valley. ⁹ That same night the Lord said to him, 'Get up, attack the camp; for I have given it into your hand.'

1 Corinthians 12:12-26 –

¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. ¹⁴ Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵If the foot were to say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶And if the ear were to say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you', nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' ²²On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; ²⁴whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶If one

member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

John 15:1-6

¹I 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.

Who Is the Vine, and Who Are the Branches?

Listen to what Jesus says, because it's quite important. "I am the vine, you are the branches." John 15:5 should be your mantra, should be the code that you as a Christian live by, and unfortunately the church has not always stressed this most important mandate. Jesus is the vine; we are the branches. Today I'd like to use this vine and branch metaphor help you understand the proper relationship that we ought to have with Jesus in order to declare in all truth that we **abide** in Jesus, as our Gospel lesson describes.

First, what does it mean to say that Jesus is the vine and we are the branches? It means that he is your Lord. Some people don't get this at all. Pride gets in our way. I remember after Hyesun and I were married, we were living in South Korea, and on their Thanksgiving Day there is a custom that children, regardless of how old those "children" are, bow down deeply to their parents and grandparents and great grandparents, etc. And I remember thinking as my wife is instructing me on how to give a deep bow, how I was thinking, "I don't want to do this. I bow to no one." Well the same pride can impair your relationship with Jesus, and it too often HAS in the case of the church. So many people see church as nothing more than a consumer product; does it satisfy ME? Do I agree with its message or ministries? And if they don't agree they try to find a church that DOES meet THEIR expectations, their political ideologies. And in this very pluralistic nation where many churches are having a hard time staying open there can be a tendency to compromise Jesus in order to appease its customers. THAT'S NOT THE RELATIONSHIP THAT JESUS WANTS US TO HAVE. I don't think I can even use the

grape vine metaphor to describe such a relationship with Jesus, because THERE IS NONE! Such a church simply does not abide in Jesus. It may call him Lord and sing pretty songs, but you ask such people in what way they are following Jesus' example or his words and they don't have a clue. If there is a relationship with Jesus, it's more like they are the vine and Jesus is one branch among many, and they decide when and how to prune Jesus to meet their own desires. They want Jesus to bear fruit for THEM. That's the reverse mindset, the one that asks, "What does the church offer ME?" And the answer is nothing, because as long as you are unwilling to make Jesus you're Lord, you're not interested in being Christian. Those are the folks who insist on being the vine and making Jesus one of their branches.

And then there are those who are okay being the branches, but they have grown too far from the vine. What happens when a branch becomes too big and is not pruned back is that it ends up using a lot of nutrients that come up through the roots and through the vine, **but those branches never produce any fruit.** One way to understand the kind of church, or that kind of Christian, whose branches have grown too long, is to think of the church that is all about individual salvation - it's all about getting that grace from Jesus and never bothering to obey his commandments, or they are selective about the commandments that they want to keep, and so they don't really grow in love. Another would be a church that get's so caught up in tradition that that the tradition becomes an end in itself rather than something that draws them closer to Jesus. They're more concerned about the order of worship or the number of candles that need to be lit or whether they are wearing the right color vestments. You know it's interesting how so many Christians are so unfamiliar with the Bible and what is written in it, and yet they can tell you when you have to stand up and sit down in a worship service. But even those who do read the Bible can get so distracted in arguing which is the best English translation of the Bible. Other people obsess over some particular social issue and make their stance on that issue their cause while ignoring or disregarding so much of what Jesus commands us to do. These are the branches that need pruning so that they are closer to the vine.

Sometimes churches need pruning - there are lots of churches and lots of pastors that will say things that will attract people, but the goal is not to just attract people – that's the message from our Old Testament lesson; God has Gideon raise an army, but says it's too big and has him widdle it down to 300 men. Why? So

Israel doesn't get the big idea of taking credit for something that God has done. A billion Christians can be a powerful force, politically or militarily. But it can be a powerful force for good or for evil. ONLY IF THE CHURCH ABIDES IN JESUS, THE TRUE VINE, IS IT THE TRUE CHURCH. AND AS LONG AS IT **IS** THE TRUE CHURCH, NUMBERS DON'T MATTER, BECAUSE GOD CAN DEFEAT ANY ENEMY WITHOUT A SINGLE PERSON. HE CAN NEUTRALIZE A FORCE OF TEN BILLION AT THE DROP OF A HAT, AND GOD CAN HEAL A BROKEN WORLD WITH A HANDFUL OF TRUE DISCIPLES.

A good churches recognizes that all its strength comes from a common vine who is Jesus. There are no weak links in a church that is focused on serving Christ: we're all there for a reason and all of us have a part to play in the fruit-bearing process. Just look at the Cranberry Festival. We all need each other and we all work WITH each other to accomplish a common task, and the fruit is abundant. It's not about the money, because the money is just a means to our ministry. It's about pleasing the community, thanking the community, making this a place of joy and peace for the community, and the money goes right back to the community, be it the community of Tottenville or the community Staten Island that is struggling to address the drug epidemic, or the North Carolina community or the Haiti community that is reeling to recover from Hurricane Matthew, or simply those who do not know who Jesus is and what it means to abide in him as he abides in us. We're a beacon of hope, and can only do that if we are connected to the true vine.

If your relationship with Christ what it needs to be, if you've been too far separated from the vine, repent and pray that you would find your strength in him. Pray that he would help you become more fruitful. If you've felt on the outside regarding the church, pray that you would embrace the church as the church embraces you. And be assured of God's power that can overcome any doubts and fears and empower you to be everything God wants you to be.