

1 John 4:7-21

⁷Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. ¹³By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

¹⁴And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. ¹⁵God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. ¹⁶So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

¹⁷Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹We love because he first loved us. ²⁰Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

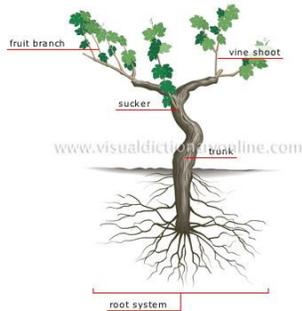
John 15:1-8

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. 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.

A Proactive God

I wish to make two brief points from today's passage, and I will share with you a bit of my experience with grapes to make those points. I actually did a lot of grape pruning as a boy. My father bought his dream home in Virginia in 1969, an 86 acre "farm" - it really wasn't a farm as my father wasn't really a farmer; he was a manager for a symphony orchestra, and he rented our land to real farmers who worked tens of thousands of acres. But on our farm there was a grape arbor, I would say about 2 acres of grapes, enough to produce more wine than we could drink in a year even if we tried really hard, because, to be truthful, some of the wine was simply undrinkable. My older brother, who was about 13 years old at the time of our first grape harvest, took a really interest in winemaking, more than I ever did. My involvement in the process usually took the form of manual labor. One of my responsibilities

became pruning the grape vines. Once I finished pruning I would gather up all the dead branches into a big pile and burn them.



One of the fascinating things I learned in pruning grapes was how difficult it could be to distinguish the vine from the branch. Sometimes the trunk of the plant split into two or three or four vines, each of which branched off into different, well, *branches*, but distinguishing the vine from the branch was not always easy. And so, since Jesus chose this analogy, I think that we should note how closely Jesus resembles you and me. He is the true vine, and we are the branches, but it's hard to tell sometimes where one ends and the other begins. He was human, and in many ways indistinguishable from you and me, except in the sense that he was human as humans are intended to be; we are to love and heal and teach and help one another, not grab everything we can get our hands on, not exploit others, not accumulate excessive wealth and power. God created us to live peacefully and fruitfully with one another.

Because Jesus resembles us so much, we have the ability to relate to him directly. I grew up in a Christian culture, but also in a pluralist culture where there were a lot of religions to choose from, and one reason that I chose to embrace this faith is that Christianity seems to be the only faith on the religious marketplace in which God becomes human, where the gulf between the divine and the earthly is breached in flesh and blood. The distinction is obscured like the distinction between a grape vine and a grape branch, and because it's breached I sense that God can really be with us. It doesn't elevate me to the level of God – that's what humanism does; it eliminates God and raises us up; in essence it declares, "I am the branch, and I don't need a vine," and a branch separated from the vine is a dead branch. Christians assert that Jesus abides in us, that there is something of the divine dwelling in us, and if we break away from that divine source we perish. It's not a matter of us attaining divine status; it's rather a matter of the divine reaching outward into the human realm. Pastor David Lose makes the point that Jesus could have said, "Abide in me...or else." Or else I will cut you off and cast you into the abyss. Or else I will disown you and have nothing at all to do with you. But that's not what he says. What he says is, "Abide in me...AS I ABIDE IN YOU." In the Greek, the expression for "as I" means that it's already the case, that Jesus *already abides* in his disciples, those guys who will deny him and betray him. I often warn folks about their beliefs by telling them not to put the cart before the horse, and by this I mean, don't think that you need to act justly to earn eternal life, to earn God's approval. When people ask if I think God will accept them, I tell them that he already has! He's come into this world and he's died for you and now he lives for you in Jesus Christ. He's quite a proactive God. The question is not if God will accept you but rather whether you will accept God, whether you'll tap into the vine and grow stronger, or whether you'll cut your ties with the vine and try to live apart from the vine. As I mentioned, some branches that grew off of a grape vine so closely resembled the vine that I could not tell them apart. My prayer is that we will all be that kind of branch.