



CHURCH of
the SAVIOUR

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“I Am the True Vine”

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John 15:1-8

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As a kid, I would often take the back way to our neighborhood school and playground, through a well-worn backyard path past Mr. Zorzi’s house with its well-tended garden. That garden included a patch of rhubarb and a concord grape arbor, both novelties to me. In the late summer, I would sometimes sneak a few grapes from his vines, relishing the combination of tart skins and sweet fruit. When I first encountered in Sunday School Jesus’s words in the fifteenth chapter of John, I thought of Mr. Zorzi’s grape vines, with its gnarly branches twisting outward from the main vines and those amazing grapes they bore.

Maybe you have a similar image in your mind from your own memories. For others, what we know of grape vines may be from Eddy’s Fruit Farm or Geauga County wineries. But to the people to whom Jesus spoke, viticulture was very familiar. It was a prime region for grapes. They knew that vines needed to be carefully pruned and trained to produce good fruit. As he did throughout the Gospels, Jesus used what was familiar to illustrate our relationship to God.

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, then you will produce much fruit. Without me, you can’t do anything.” It’s a simple point, really. We’re all part of a spiritual life system, designed by God to work together and produce “fruit.” We are neither the vine, nor are we the fruit. We...are the branches. We’re a vital link to the vine – the source of water and nutrients that sustain life, but *we* aren’t the source of that life. Neither are we the fruit, the outcome of the energy and time invested in growing. No one grows a grape vine to produce *branches* – the goal is the *fruit*.

Here’s a more common illustration. Let’s say we want to add light to a room, so we get a lamp. The lamp is on a table several feet away from the outlet. In order for the power to get to the lamp, we need an extension cord. Plugging the cord into the lamp alone won’t produce light. Only when we plug the cord into the outlet does power reach the lamp.

In this illustration, we are like the extension cord, serving as the conduit for the power that comes from Christ to bring light to the world around us. But often, we spend too much of our time focused on the lamp, trying our darnedest to make the light shine brightly. We forget where the power comes from, and we lose our connection. Or sometimes we become so fixated on our connection to the outlet that we forget that the goal is to let the power flow through us to produce light. We’re plugged into the source, but that’s as far as we go. The power is still there. It’s just not producing any light. We’re not the power or the light. We’re just a cord. Nothing wrong with a cord. But unless it’s connected to the source of power and the world around it, it isn’t fulfilling the purpose for which it was intended.

The electricity example wouldn’t have made any sense to the people in Jesus’s time. He used what they knew to make his point, just as he would with us. Unlike electrical cords, vines are living, growing things, always changing and responding to the environment. And vines need to be carefully cultivated. Most importantly, they need to be pruned to produce fruit.

I don’t know about you, but I don’t much like being pruned. Pruning means cutting away all the parts that don’t produce fruit or that won’t provide the right structure for a healthy life. If you’ve ever looked at a grape arbor after seasonal pruning, it looks barren, almost dead. Pruning is aggressive. But left to its own devices, the plant would grow wild and unruly, with many shoots or canes sprouting off in different directions, sapping strength from the plant that should be going to the fruit. And that’s a good metaphor for our lives. We all have things in our lives that could use some pruning: relationships or habits or activities that wouldn’t make

it past the vintner's shears. But we don't like the pruning, so we evade it or put it off, limiting the fruit we produce. Maybe that's why we need the gardener to prune us – if it's up to us, we're just as happy to leave things as they are.

Being pruned sounds painful. And it often is. Pastor and scholar David Lose says that sometimes passages like this sound more like threats than words of encouragement or comfort. "Remain in me" ...or else – be pruned, wither, thrown into the fire, and die.¹ Words like these from Jesus can be misused to bully people into staying faithful and loyal to the church. But faith doesn't come from intimidation. Note what Jesus says in verse four: "Remain in me and I will remain in you." Other translations word it, "Remain in me *as* I remain in you." And that "as" changes everything. This isn't an "or else" passage, but a "because" passage. We can remain connected to Jesus because he remains in us. It's a *promise*, not a threat. As the letter of John says, "we love because he first loved us." And he continues to love us and abide in and with us.

As we know well by now, when looking at the "I am" sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of John, context matters. Chapter fifteen is part of the Farewell Discourse, the final words of instruction from Jesus to his disciples. He's speaking to them here after the Last Supper, after he washed their feet, somewhere between the Upper Room and the Garden of Gethsemane. Life is about to get really hard for the disciples. Jesus knows what's going to happen, that he will be violently taken away from his friends and followers, that they will be traumatized by his arrest and crucifixion. Though the Resurrection will come, it will not save them from the pain of what they will experience in the meantime. While they don't entirely understand, they know that he's been saying goodbye to them the last few days, especially the last few hours, and they're anxious, anticipating something terrible but hoping against hope.

But there's also another context to consider. The Gospel of John was the last of the four canonical gospels to have been written, perhaps as late as the 90s of the First Century. It was a time of intense persecution and martyrdom for the followers of Jesus. To be a Christian was to risk punishment and violent death. The faithful quite literally were being cut down. Jesus's promise in John was an assurance that what they were going through, no matter how awful, wasn't the end of their story. Their endurance in the face of persecution would bear fruit in the life to come and for untold future generations. Jesus's words brought courage and strength. "Remain in me as I remain in you." *Jesus is with you, for you, in you, and he will not let you go.*

Do you ever feel cut off or cut down? Feelings of loneliness and isolation like a weight pressing down on you. Hearing your doctor say the word "cancer." Helpless as your spouse with dementia slowly slips away. Stuck in a relationship that feels soul-crushing. Being bullied at school or online for so long that you're starting to believe the things they say about you. Hearing that the job market has recovered, but not finding that to be true for you. Living with constant anxiety and fear about your future or your family.

Maybe you're feeling that way about our church. Does God really have a vision for us? After so much time apart, can we recover our momentum? What if people don't come back or giving doesn't rebound? After nearly two years of online adaptation and losing touch, will we be able to reconnect with our kids and youth and help them grow in faith? How will the unsettled questions swirling around The United Methodist Church impact who we are and how we accomplish what God wants for us? If the fundamental nature of what it means to be a Christian church has changed or continues to change, can we adapt to a new reality?

Sometimes we try so hard to produce good fruit that we forget that the fruit doesn't come from us, but from the vine. We're *the branches*, the conduit through which life in Christ is made real in the world. We can hold on to things that once were fruitful but aren't any more, afraid to let go because we think every extension of ourselves necessary. But even fruit-bearing branches need pruning to be as fruitful as they can be. Most importantly, we need to remain strong in our connection to the vine, to abide in Christ as he abides in us.

¹ <https://www.davidlose.net/2018/04/easter-5-b-as-i-abide-in-you/>

How do we remain connected to Christ? I'm convinced that the best thing we can do is to focus on the basics. No gimmicks or silver bullets, no newly minted process to follow. The way to deeper connection to Christ is to focus on our core identity and practices. Please forgive the sports analogy. Legendary Green Bay Packers coach Vince Lombardi was known for using a signature play in his team's offense: "the power sweep." Everyone knew they were going to run it, but their opponents couldn't stop it. Why was it so effective? Lombardi said, "It's as basic a play as there can be in football. We simply do it over and over and over."²

Our "signature play" at Church of the Saviour, if you will, is the Five Practices of Faithful Discipleship: *Worship, Grow, Serve, Give, and Invite*. We'll remind you of the five practices for us as a church and as individuals later today, but I'll briefly review them now. We *worship* every Sunday – together if we can, online if we must; and we individually pray five times a day giving thanks to God. We *grow* through participation in a small group for study and formation; we individually read at least five verses of scripture a day (about the length of most daily devotionals). We *serve* by engaging in hands-on mission at least twice a year; we each individually perform five acts of kindness every week. We *give* a percentage of our income to God's work through the church; we also perform five acts of unexpected generosity every month. And we *invite* people to experience life in Christ through our words and our actions; each of us inviting five people to church every year. Worship, grow, serve, give, and invite – five simple words, five simple practices. But by committing ourselves to these five practices over and over, we cultivate a deeper connection with Christ, the vine in which we experience life.

Jesus said, "I am the true vine." His words remind us that the source of life is not an overfilled calendar, not a job that demands constant attention, not the number of likes or followers on social media, not the self-medication that numbs the loneliness or pain or feeling of being overwhelmed. Christ is the *true* vine. And he will remain in us as we remain in him. We don't do this by ourselves. Stay connected, and the fruit will come. Thanks be to God. Amen.

² Ed Gruver. "The Lombardi Sweep" *The Coffin Corner*. Vol. 19, No. 5 (1997). Online: http://www.profootballresearchers.org/archives/Website_Files/Coffin_Corner/19-05-712.pdf (accessed March 30, 2022).