

“A Vine to Grab”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens
based on the theme, “THE JESUS YOU MEET TODAY”
Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.
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John 15:1-8 [NRSV]

¹“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.

Have you ever heard people use some of these verses out of context? I have heard them used in scandalous and frivolous ways. Preachers who promote a “health, wealth, and happiness” gospel have told us to believe that if we were “real” Christians we could “ask anything we wish and it would be granted.” Other Christians believe that God is all about cutting people off who don’t believe the “right” way. We all know the harm such theology can do. We know it isn’t true that just because you wish for a cure, or love, or the lottery that you will get it because you are a Christian. We all know plenty of people who have felt “cut off” from God because somehow their beliefs didn’t fit someone else’s.

Great harm has been done in the name of God by such use of these verses. As those who understand what it means to do “exegesis,” we know we have to

dig deeper than these surface assumptions and ask about the context – the framework around – these verses to understand them faithfully. Let’s look at the whole thing in context and see if we can’t better understand the Jesus that said these things so long ago, and the Jesus we meet today.

In our Scripture this morning we hear Jesus pronounce himself the true vine. He uses the “I am” statement that we said last week is the English translation for Yahweh. In so doing Jesus is affirming his one-ness with God. Even more so, he affirms it in saying his Father, God, is the vinegrower and he is the true vine. They are truly connected. Some people assumed that because Jesus was executed as an enemy of the religious and government powers that he was a blasphemer or in some way evil.

More than claiming his own connection with God, Jesus invites us to claim our connection with him and thereby with God. “Abide in me,” he says repeatedly. “Apart from me you can do nothing,” he says. “If you abide in me you will bear much fruit.” Let’s explore this vine-connection and how it helps us understand the Jesus we meet today.

In inviting us to stay connected, to be part of the vine and abide with him Jesus is inviting us to reconsider our current American lifestyle. Jesus invites us to set aside our individualistic, self-absorbed lifestyles and priorities. He invites us to “vine-up,” to “get-connected,” or maybe more accurately, to recognize our *vineness*. It isn’t a question of whether we are connected or not, it is a question of whether we are going to acknowledge it or not, and in acknowledging it, claiming it, owning it, celebrating it.

Wiley Stephens, a pastor in Atlanta says, “Much of the modern debate on how one obtains spiritual growth or how one finds oneself has led to the modern heresy of thinking of faith in individualistic terms as opposed to community. We must remember that to follow Jesus Christ is a call to be a part of the Body of Christ.... G.K. Chesterton wrote, ‘A man can no more possess a private religion than he can possess a private sun or moon.’”

He says, “In being centered on self, too many times we no longer draw from the vine to produce but seek [only] ways to be comforted. The danger is instead of looking how we can be a part of the body, how we can bear fruit, we

look for what fills my needs.” He adds this puts us in “danger of seeing the church as existing for its members instead of its members existing to serve the world. We think too much like consumers, putting self first.”

He goes on to say, “The church is not a theme park. We must confront the danger of rating everything in terms of entertainment value. The measure of worship is not, ‘What did I enjoy?’ or even, ‘What did I experience?’ but, ‘What was I inspired to seek and do?’ The measure of stewardship is not, ‘What did I receive for my gift or time?’ but rather, ‘What did I do for others’¹

His words lead me to think that one of the keys to our “vine-ness” is that we learn to think about the church differently. The primary question is, what helps US best “bear fruit” for God? We must focus first on how we can bear fruit for God. But what does all this mean for Mother’s Day or for understanding what it means to “meet Jesus today?”

I think mothers are the ones who teach us first about “vine-ness.” Stick together, hold hands when you cross the street. Put the family first. You are always in my heart. Those are the kinds of things mothers teach whether it is with words or with actions or both. So I suspect Jesus learned a thing or two about vinedom from Mary, his mother, as much as he did from God his father. In the same way I figure you and I get at least a sense of what being “on the vine” means from our mothers.

¹ Rev. Dr. B. Wiley Stephens, “Well-Connected Christians”, Day1.org.

Our challenge is to keep from letting the vine be either too binding or too loose. If the vine is too tight, too restrictive it can choke off growth. Too many children have to “cut the apron strings” but can’t because mom’s vine is too strong, too tight. Everyone knows that if you keep the fruit on the vine too long it will be just as bad as if it falls off the vine and rots on the ground. Too loose a vine and it will fall off, become disconnected. How many people in this world are wandering around wondering why they feel so disconnected, so lost? They feel like they have no vine to grab on to.

Here for me is where the Jesus we meet today comes in. This is where the church and the living Christ become an important vine for anyone. Even if you have perfect family relations – does anyone? - I believe we still need the vine that God offers us to complete our lives. It isn’t so much that we have to “hook up” to the vine as it is a matter of recognizing we ARE part of the vine. We start out that way, and even if we try to sever that connection, even if we try to break away from God, it doesn’t change the fact that God, the vinegrower, is still seeking to re-graft us into the vine.

Instead of assuming God is looking to cut us off, let’s assume God is always looking to keep us connected. I hear Jesus saying God wants nothing more than for us to abide in him. In that vein, he has sent his son Jesus to make that connection more real, given it a human face, so to speak.

Jesus says he wants us to produce fruit. But what kind of fruit? The

simplest way to say what Jesus wants us to produce is to ask what does a fruit tree produce? An apple tree produces what? A fig tree produces what? And so on... So it seems to me in essence that bearing much fruit means producing what God intended for you to produce. Maybe that isn’t so much something we would necessarily call religious or saintly, but I would guess it is spiritual.

Greg Bloomquist compares this to making a fine wine. “In Mediterranean cultures, grapes have only one end: to be made into wine. And wine, as Scripture teaches us, is not for drunkenness and oblivion -- which is a perversion of its use -- but to make glad the heart....” He goes on to say this: “Our fruits, our words and deeds, bring glory to God [when] they make glad the world, [when] they bring joy to the world.” Not humour, not entertainment: joy, that profound sense of knowing the truth that is even expressed by the old adage ‘in vino veritas’: truth is found in the wine! Why? Because God so loved the world that he wanted the world to live and to live abundantly and the world lives and rejoices in its life when it lives the truth. That is the intent of the fruit that the branches produce.”² So our fruit is to bring forth the words and deeds that add to the joy of the world. It is far too easy to add to the misery and pain of the world. The world finds these things on its own, in fact.

Now, let’s deal with two of the “squirmies” in this text. First is the issue of pruning. John says God the

² L. Gregory Bloomquist, “The Key Ingredients to a Fine Wine,” www.bloomquist.ca/publications, May 5, 20002.

vinegrower will prune us, but he won't cut us off if we abide in him. Pruning doesn't sound very joyful, yet it can produce joyful results. Greg Bloomquist also tells this story: "A former rector of my parish grew ill with cancer. People expected him to resign. But, he listened to the voice of God and knew that God wanted him to stay and continue to minister. He stayed on in the parish, and grew weaker and weaker, week by week. He grew weaker, and members of the parish were forced to do administrative and clerical tasks that would otherwise have been reserved to the priest. He grew too weak to visit parishioners; lay people had to visit. He grew too weak to preach; lay people had to preach. Near the end, he grew so weak that he was unable to stand, to hold up his arms for blessing; others had to assist him even to do those things strictly reserved for the priest, such as preside at the altar and bless the people. Finally, he died. But, he left behind a radically transformed parish, one that had learned how to function on its own, and not just survive but to thrive. That particular set of branches that is my parish had been radically pruned, but it came back stronger the next year."³

None of us would choose pruning on our own, but the vinegrower always sees the finished product more clearly than we can. We can choose to resist the efforts, we can become sour, or rotten, in response to events, but I believe the fruit we are intended to produce is a sweet, nourishing, joy-giving fruit.

The other part of this passage that may cause us the "squirmies" is the part

about asking whatever you wish and it will be done. How many of us have tried that kind of in relation to an illness, a lottery, a love, or some other wish. I think we have to stay connected with the vine of the text as well as the vine Jesus Christ. If we keep this in context then we connect this verse with the next one that says, "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples." So I would think that whatever we ask that would be to help us bear fruit and become his disciples is what God will grant. God invites us to ask for the joy of being connected to the vine. God welcomes our requests that help us produce that joy in the world around us. These two "outrageous" verses can lead us down the wrong path if we take them out of context. In context they help us know how to grab onto the vine that Christ offers us.

This Mothers Day 2009 I invite you to grab onto the vine, produce the joy, and abide in that joy that comes with the Jesus Christ we meet today. That's the way we bear much fruit and become his disciples not just here but out there in the world. Grab the vine and let the joy of God, seen in Jesus Christ flow through you. AMEN.

³ Ibid.