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"THE TRUE VINE"

John 15:1-17

Today we remain in Jesus' farewell discourse and consider the last of his "I Am" sayings in which he uses the divine name and identifies himself with Yahweh. Jesus announced, "I am the true or authentic vine." We live in one of the great wine-growing regions on planet earth! Wine grapes were important in Jesus day as well. In fact, in the agrarian economy of ancient Israel the three key cash crops were - wheat, wine, and olive oil.

The image of the vine was familiar to every first-century Jew. Time and time again the people of Israel were likened to a vine, planted by God the vinegrower. For example Isaiah wrote (5:7), "The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are God's pleasant planting." On Jewish coins during the reigns of the Maccabees, Israel was represented by the symbol of the vine. And in Herod's temple, the first-century historian Josephus tells us above the entrance to the Holy Place or sanctuary proper was a gigantic grapevine of pure

gold, representing Israel. Josephus claims that some of these grape clusters were “the height of a man.”

Now let’s see what Jesus does with that familiar imagery. Read John 15:1-17 (p.109 NT in the pew Bibles).

In this text Jesus describes himself as the vine, his followers as the branches, and God as the vinegrower.

What is Jesus saying about himself? This is another example of replacement theology in John’s Gospel. Jesus is claiming that he is the true vine, the personification of the true Israel. From what he said earlier at the temple cleansing we now know Jesus is both the living temple of God and the true vine that embodies the new people of God.

Jesus is implying, “You think that because you belong to ethnic Israel, to the Jewish people, that you are a branch of the vine of God. I am the true vine. Your ethnicity cannot save you. I am the only one who can graft you into a saving relationship with God the vinegrower. In fact, I am that vine. Every branch that wants to live spiritually must be joined to me. Just as a

branch must be joined to the vine to live and bear fruit, so you must be joined to me.”

What do we learn about what it means for us to be followers of Christ? As branches our challenge is to stay connected to Christ the vine in order to bear fruit. The verb “abide” or “remain” appears 11 times in these verses! That is our privilege as well as our challenge. Paul uses similar imagery in his often-repeated phrase describing Christians as those who are “in Christ” (Eph. 1:3; 1:4; 1:9; 1:11; 1:20).

Unlike actual branches on a vine, we have freedom to choose whether or not to remain in Christ. Jesus assures us, “Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”

Jesus says God’s role is that of vinegrower. I doubt that many of us have ever seriously grown grapes. However, many of us have grown roses and this analogy is true for them. Just as “suckers”, thick new branches which produce no blossoms sometimes grow on roses and must be trimmed, so God removes fruitless branches from the vine. And just as in order to get the

best new growth and best new blooms, roses need to be pruned each winter, so God prunes fruitful branches so that they will bear even more fruit! This annual pruning seems counter-intuitive, but it works! To get new growth you actually dramatically cut back your roses!

There's a word-play in the original Greek. Jesus said in v.2b-3, "Every branch that bears fruit God prunes (or "cleans out") to make it bear more fruit." The verb to prune is "*katharei*" from "*katharidzo*." Our English word "catharsis" comes from this Greek word group. Jesus continues, "You have already been made clean by the word that I have spoken to you." The Greek word translated clean "*katharoi*" is also from the same word group. So God works with us branches, cleans us up, prunes us, so that as Christians we will be more and more fruitful. Being fruitful means that we follow Jesus and obey his commands in everyday life.

And so God prunes us, to better mold us into the people Christ intends us to be. Have you ever thought about that? God may sometimes allow us to experience trials and struggles in

order to prune us. Painful losses may help us stay better connected to Jesus Christ. And in the words of Pres. Pastor Walt Gerber, "We can trust the pruning process because we know the One who holds the shears." How do you respond to life's difficulties, challenges, and hardships? Spiritual growth seldom happens when things are simple and easy and uncomplicated. In fact, God may work best in our lives when our plans fail, our dreams die, our hopes fade.

So the central challenge for each of us in this text is to abide in, to stay closely connected to Jesus Christ! Think about A.A. and other 12 step groups. They are built on the principle of staying connected, of abiding. How does the addict survive? By staying connected to his/her sponsor and their weekly group meeting! To lose contact with other addicts in their mutual struggle for sobriety is often devastating!

How do we abide in Jesus Christ? One way is through prayer. Speaking of prayer in this presidential election season, both Republicans and now an increasing number of Democrats are wanting to appeal to "values voters" many of whom are

evangelical Christians. I like the story of the two Senators talking about religion and politics, one a Republican and the other a Democrat. The Republican said, "You Democrats are so secular I'll bet you \$50 you can't recite the Lord's Prayer." The Democrat grimaced as if concentrating and then a big broad smile came across his face as he confidently began, "Now I lay me down to sleep . . ." The Republican was amazed and responded, "I can't believe it!" as he opened his wallet, "I didn't think you really knew it!"

What is your practice of daily prayer? One of the five pillars of Islam is their practice of prayer five times a day. I respect and admire that! If you're a faithful Muslim you can't forget about Allah for long, because within 3 or 4 hours you will be praying again! I don't want to get legalistic and construct a bunch of rules about mandatory hours of prayer, but I think we each need to find our own pattern of daily prayer. Maybe it's just after you've awakened and are beginning your day. Maybe it's some quiet time during your day, perhaps on your lunch hour. Or maybe it's time in the evening before bed. What I think works

best is time which is unlikely to be interrupted by cell phones or pagers, which allows you to concentrate and share your day with Christ and ask for his guidance and direction.

Another way of abiding Christ is through participation in Holy Communion, the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist. Unlike the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, John does not record Jesus words over the bread and cup at the Last Supper. It's possible there is a veiled reference to the Lord's Supper in Jesus' bread of life discourse. In that context Jesus said "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them" (6:56). As I mentioned some weeks back "eating Christ's flesh and drinking his blood" is metaphorical language for receiving him into our lives by faith. It may also refer to the Sacrament.

It's also possible that this teaching about the true vine may also be a veiled reference to the Sacrament. Early Christian readers who knew the institution of the Lord's Supper would recall how the contents of the cup are described in the gospels as "the fruit of the vine" (Mark 14:25; Matt. 26:29; Luke 22:18).

And in this speech Jesus talks about his approaching death in sacrificial terms.

What's the function of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper?

To make Christ's sacrifice real to us on an ongoing basis and to keep us spiritually connected to, abiding in, remaining in Jesus Christ! For those who receive it with faith, the Sacrament provides a life-giving attachment to the Risen Christ. So if you want to abide in Jesus, stay connected to him, this is yet another opportunity to do so. Jesus said, "I 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."

Let us pray: Gracious God, as the master gardener and vinegrower, we thank you for the privilege of abiding in Christ Your Son, the authentic and true vine. Allow us so to cling and be joined to him that we may become ever more fruitful as his followers. Through Christ the Lord we pray. Amen.