

“Blessings on the Blossom, Blessings on the Fruit”

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Preacher

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From the Pulpit

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Currently for our chaplain’s book club we are reading a book called *The Power of Ritual*, by Casper ter Kuile. The book is about looking at everyday activities through the lens of soulful or sacred practice. One thing he says really stuck with me, that the question “who am I” inevitably leads to the question “whose am I.” Kuile is getting at the fact that who we understand ourselves to be is inextricably linked to who and what we are in relationship with.

Today’s scripture is an important one for understanding the structure of Christian relationship with the divine, with one another, and with our selves.

And now Jesus whispers to us. Trying to both be firm and also loving, extending the truth of who He is in our lives.

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If you all would take a moment to pray with me: Holy one, our vine and source of life we ask for your presence to be here in this place. Hide me behind the cross such that who you are pervades this space and each of us. May we all grow closer to you from our exploration and meditation on these scriptures. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

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15 I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser/grower. 2 Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.

Hey friends. My fellow church goers, my fellow advocates, my fellow leaders, independent thinkers, creative minds, artists, caregivers, parents, children, and so on.... God is in charge.

I said it. I said it. It's God. That's who's in charge. And you know what that means...we are not in charge. This scripture does an excellent job of showing us an aspect of the nature of God and our relationship to the Father and Christ.

First, God is the Vine Grower – the Gardner if you will. God's role is to tend the plant/the vine/the garden.

What does tending entail?

It entails pruning, watering, general maintenance. Any of the branches not bearing fruit God takes away, and any of the ones that are bearing fruit get pruned so that they make more fruit.

Pruning – let's take a special moment for pruning.

Pruning is the process when individual branches are cut selectively. As opposed to something like shearing which is the process when all branches are cut indiscriminately. Pruning is a science all unto itself and so I'm grateful to leave the pruning of the Community in God's hands.

To prune correctly/or well, there are instructions on the types of instruments to use, on where to cut the plant themselves, at what angle, when during the season to cut, and how that varies from plant to plant, and varies with what your intentions are with the plant. Which brings me to why prune the vine?

There are basically six key reasons to prune.

1. **Maintain Plant Health and Aesthetics:** This involves removal of dead, diseased, or injured plant parts. Removal of these weak parts helps to minimize the potential for secondary or opportunistic pests.

2. **Control Growth:** This involves pruning to control the overall size and density of the plant.
3. **Encourage Flower and Fruit Production:** This involves pruning to maximize flowering and fruit production.

This usually involves pruning to open up the canopy in order to allow more light to penetrate. This stimulates the formation of flower buds and blossoms.

4. **Create Special Forms:** This involves creating highly specialized forms such as hedges, espaliers, topiaries, and pollards.
5. **Rejuvenate Old or Overgrown Plants:** This involves pruning to create new plants from old plants. This practice is particularly helpful for shrubs that have become overgrown, sparse, or leggy and helps to stimulate the formation of new, more productive, vigorous wood.
6. **Protect People and Property:** This involves pruning of branches and limbs that are hazardous, weak, or rotted and represent potential hazards to people and property.

Here we have an interesting insight into what God is doing in our lives. God is removing the hazardous parts to protect the plant and the surrounding life, She is creating new plants from the old, She is giving us all our special form, She is opening us up to allow more light to come into our being for the sake of us yielding fruits, God is maintaining our health overall.

Jesus is the True Vine and Jesus' role as the vine is identified two times in this scripture today, in verse 1 where he states who He is and who God the Father is – Jesus as “the true vine”; and in verse 5 when he states who he is and who we are – Jesus as “the vine.” This is the life source of the branches.

Jesus is our source of life. He is where our nourishment and strength come from. We do not get life source from other branches, nor anywhere else...

Christ himself as given to us by the eternal parent – through Jesus we know. He has asked us to not only follow him, but to be connected to him. To abide in him.

Why the True Vine? The Greek is used here for true meanings – unconcealed, true, true in fact, worthy of credit, truthful, as it accords with fact (reality), i.e. attested because tested – literally, “what can’t be hidden.” Jesus has died and risen, his purpose made known, fully realized, and indisputable. He is God’s love for us in the flesh. Abide in that Love. And the Word became flesh. He is inviting us into lifelong relationship with him and God in this passage.

We will abide in him and also him within us.

We are the branches.

As scholar Gail O’Day suggests, branches in a vine are nearly indistinguishable from one another, impossible to determine where one stops and another starts, all running together as they grow out of the central vine.

I love this image because it shows how we are equal in the eyes of God, all of us on equal footing as God seeks to cleanse us, care for us, and tend us.

I also love the image of the vine as opposed to a another type of plant because vines and their branches are travelers, they don’t just grow bigger, they climb, they curl around objects and go in different directions.

As branches we have one job – okay we have a few but, in this scripture, today, we have one big one.

Abide in the True Vine. That’s it. EASY PEASY.

We gave Pruning a moment so let’s give **Abide** a moment:

To abide means to obey, follow, keep to, hold to, comply with, accede to, and in reference to feeling or memory, means to survive, last, persist, stay, hold on, live on.

We live in a very independence driven world. This scripture is showing us a very interdependent relationship.

Susan Hedahl a professor at Lutheran Theological Seminary says, “The relationship of abiding means that we cannot “go it alone” in our spiritual lives, what Parker Palmer once described as a “free floating spirituality.” Jesus notes the impossible cannot happen: “the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless you abide in me” (John 15:4).

Proverbs 3:5-6 says, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths”

Lastly, let's give **fruit** it's moment – there's nothing here that defines what the fruit is that we will produce. So, when thinking about Fruit – literally it is a plant reproductive system that is juicy and yummy and has seeds in it. The principal purpose of the fruit is the protection and dissemination of the seed.

The words “bear fruit” appear six times in these eight verses. The fruit happens organically because the vine is true and the gardener good.

My paternal grandmother and her sister lived next door to one another in Louisville Kentucky. I often ran between Granny and Other Granny's houses when I was small. I would help them snap peas and they always seemed to have fresh fruits and veggies from the garden. Other granny grew grapes in her garden, and she used those grapes to make her famous jelly. I can still see the color of the jelly in the jar, I can still taste it. That was the jelly I grew up eating. Not the store-bought kind. I wish I had asked her how she made it. She always seemed to have jars at the ready to give away.

It is perhaps also worth keeping in mind that branches don't live off their own fruit. The fruit is for someone else. Just like Other Granny's jelly.

5 I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

And on the flip side for us not being able to bear fruit without being connected to Christ – likewise the vine doesn't have much to give without the branches. We are an extension of the work of God in the world. The fruit we bear is an extension of new life from the source.

Without the disciples, the fulfillment of John 3:16 cannot come to bear and Jesus' commission to the disciples, "As the Father has sent me so I send you" (20:21), is a vacuous directive. How can God love the world without them? Without us?

And so, we have a choice to make. To be attached to Christ fully and completely, to be rooted in his teachings and modeling his walk. Praying as he teaches us to pray. To be inviting him into every decision we make and every moment of our lives.

Or not.

6 If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

When branches are not fruitful, God removes them. Branches become kindling for fire, something that will be cleansed, transformed by the creator for the betterment of the rest of the plant.

I AM the vine, you are the branches – these words are intended not as a command or judgment, but as invitation, summons, and promise. And from this promise Jesus says that we can ask for anything, and it be done.

As a community do you have a prayer in this season for God to reveal something to you, to create an opportunity for you, to clear away the old for new life?

We can ask God for anything, and we will receive it as the beloved community. As long as we are abiding in Jesus. What we ask for will then be informed by the connection to Christ, and through our discernment, we will hear God's will for us.

And when we receive great things, joy, nourishment, and when we create beautiful things and bear fruit to share with others and the world, the glory goes back to God – because nothing we do is done alone.

In Kuile's book on ritual there is a prayer he includes that was said at mealtime – a time of sacred sharing with family or friends.

Blessings on the blossom, blessings on the fruit,
Blessings on the leaf and stem, blessings on the root.
Glory to God and peace upon our hearts! Amen.