

Growing the Vine  
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One of the enjoyable aspects of reading Scripture and writing sermons as a regular practice is the way that reading induces curiosity, which sends me off down tangents of research and discovery. This is even (or especially) true of passages that I have read many times before, with images that have become very familiar. In the Gospel of John, there are seven speeches or discourses given by Jesus which begin “I am the \_\_\_\_\_.” I am the bread of life; I am the light of the world; I am the gateway; I am the good shepherd; I am the resurrection and the life; I am the way, the truth, and the life, and today, I am the true vine. All of those statements give me an opportunity to explore a metaphor, to study some words, some context, and then to wonder, “What does this have to do with me, or us, now or in the future?”

If Jesus is the true vine, the genuine grapevine - the real thing, in other words, I'd better learn a bit about them. I have plenty of wild grapes around the edges of my property. They are a mess. They produce little sour grapes, which can be made into jelly if you add tons of sugar. They have some nice bendable canes to use for making wreaths. And I took some of them to wrestle with to make the cross that is in the main hallway: a place where the children sometimes hand their seasonal handiwork. So I am familiar with the whole Vermont wild grape thing.

But the vine image, both in Hebrew and Christian Scripture, celebrates the tended vine of the vineyard, not accidental overgrowth. In order to produce enough grapes to make wine, a lot of thought and labor and expertise goes into care of the plant. There is a trunk, which is the permanent base for the whole vine. The trunk of a mature vine will have arms or short branches or cordons from which canes or spurs originate. Fruit is only produced on shoots that grow from one-year-old canes. The branches need to be tended so that healthy new canes are produced each year.

So much for my horticulture lesson. Jesus gave a word picture, an allegory: God is the vine grower, Jesus is the solid trunk, and the disciples (or we) are the semi-permanent arms or cordons. I take the picture one step further to read “branches” as canes that produce the annual fruit: the things we do, the ways we reach out. Through all these parts runs the life-giving sap of the Spirit. When one part is cut away, the sap does not run and it doesn't produce and it goes to the brush pile or the burn pile. Of course, old canes- and these might be old habits, unsuccessful ventures, unnecessary work - need to be discarded: that's part of the tending. Staying connected to the trunk and being tended by the vine grower is a good thing.

We are told to abide in Jesus the way that branches abide on the trunk. This is the way to be connected to Divine Spirit. John the Gospel writer loves that word “abide.” It shows up 40 times in the Gospel and 23 times in the letters of John. Literally it means remain or rest in or stay with. We might say, “continue to be a part of” or “live in union with.” What's implied is connection and dependence. So, I ask, to what do you feel connected? On what do you depend? In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we ask these questions with a certain pathos, a certain wistfulness. We are more connected than ever, but we may feel increasingly isolated. We value independence more than ever, but we end

up depending on less trustworthy people, institutions, and technological advances for what we want and need. We yearn for deeper connections and deeper meaning, but fear them too. What will be demanded of us when we become so connected to and so dependent upon the lively divine energy that runs through us and among us? Not sure we want to sign up for **that**.

The reading from the first letter of John is a sort of hymn to Divine Love, still using a lot of that word “abiding.” “God is Love” it sings; “Everyone who loves is born of God.” And, “No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives **in** us.” It even addresses that existential fear that is part of the human condition and sings, beautifully, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.” To me this is a kind of inspirational anthem that gives us the courage to risk deeper connections. It tells us not to be motivated by fear of punishment, but by the joy of resting in the embrace of God.

When I say “resting,” I don’t mean that we are idle. We have fruit to produce. There is no command for us to bear fruit. There **is** a promise that this naturally happens through the power of that sap running through us. We don’t have to squeeze it out of ourselves by sheer effort. We are branches and extensions of a vine tended by that gardening expert, God, who nourishes and tends us for the greater good.

This time, in reading all this through and thinking about it, it came to me that the branches and canes do not live off their own fruit. Their fruit is for someone else, just the way that love is “perfected in us” when we show it to our brothers and sisters. The divine sap is flowing: we have been loved by God, we have been encouraged by the love of Jesus, and so we love, not just those who are closest to us or those who are charming and easy to love. Those branches and tendrils are reaching out, and extends to places and to people to whom love is foreign or denied, where trust in love is fading or absent. To be connected to God is to be given a mission: to take to others the love that casts out fear. To demonstrate that love through our lives and actions: the joy of connection, and yes, dependence.

Even though it is a phrase that is often heard, saying “God is love” honestly is not easy or sentimental. It is counter-intuitive for most of the people around us, and counter-cultural. To so many, it just does not make sense. How can we translate the hymn-like words of John so that they become living fruit rather than an escapist fantasy?

This is why we need a community of faith and a place to worship: because we need a safe place, fertile ground for answering these questions together. Here we can speak of needs and hurts that we share, as well as the needs and hurts of other communities far away. Here we can listen for the leadings and leanings of the Spirit to understand the mission of God for our place and time. This may lead some of us to the Dominican Republic to discover the joy of connection there. We discover children being playful and creative with stones and grass and wood, and we are enriched by their joy and laughter. We discover classrooms with no books, and try to create a better learning environment for these lovely young people. Webs of connection are woven. We depend on translators, and people like Rita Severinghaus, and all the teachers and volunteers who carry our tendrils of love to those villages. The divine sap is flowing, the vine flourishes.

One verse in our Gospel reading has always been a bit troublesome for me, because it seems to encourage unrealistic expectations of our prayer life. It says, in our NRSV translation: “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”

This sounds like *carte blanche*. “Ask God for anything you want, and, if you’re connected, you’ll get it.” That’s not my experience or my understanding of prayer. But then I read another translation: “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, . . . if you desire, ask and it will come to being in you.” This way of understanding the verse gives another reason that we live in community. The presence and the words of Divine Love work within us and among us, so that we will wish for and ask for works of love to come to being in us. We are praying together to bear fruit, to become vessels and pathways of compassion and grace.

I close with these words by the 14<sup>th</sup> century philosopher and mystic, Catherine of Siena. It was written as part of a dialogue between God and the human soul:

*You, then, are my workers. You have come from me, the supreme eternal gardener, and I have engrafted you onto the vine by making myself one with you.*

*Keep in mind that each of you has your own vineyard. But everyone is joined to the neighbors’ vineyards without any dividing lines. They are so joined together, in fact, that you cannot do good or evil for yourself without doing the same for your neighbors.*

Amen.