

“I Am the True Vine”

6th Sunday of Easter

April 27, 2008

Texts: Psalm 148 / Acts 17:22-31 / 1 Peter 3:8-18 / John 15:1-8

John 15:1-8

15:1 “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. 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. 3 Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. 4 Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. 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. 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. 9 As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. 10 If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. 11 These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

Vineyards are beautiful places. I have seen vineyards in southern Spain...lush green leaves in manicured rows against a back-drop of parched and grey land. I have seen the vineyards among the lush hills of Napa and Sonoma (even the names give me a thrill) in northern California in the dead of winter; their large yellowed leaves stark against a blazing blue, crisp sky. But, none of these are more beautiful than the vineyard we have right here on Wadmalaw Island, Irvin Vinyards. What a beautiful, magical place any time of the year.

Still, vineyards would be haphazard and ugly and dying, if there weren't those who spend their lives caring for the vines. And they would be worthless places if they did not involve the production of fruit. A wild vineyard with little to no fruit is worthless.

Throughout the OT, the vineyard was seen as the symbol of Israel, and Israel was God's vineyard. Why, even the great Temple in Jerusalem was adorned with a sculpted golden vine and large clusters of grapes, and early Jewish coinage has the vine and the grapes on its surface. Isaiah, chapter 5 (vs. 1-7), lays out God's vision for the people of Israel, His people,

Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.
2 He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines;
he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it;
and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes...
5 And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard.
I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured;
I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.
6 I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed,
and briers and thorns shall grow up;
I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.
7 For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel,
and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting;
and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed;
for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!

During good times, when the people of Israel followed God, the vineyard was seen as a place of rejoicing and celebration, of abundance and fertility. However, all too often Israel did not follow God and then the vineyard was seen as a place of judgment. One of the great curses seen in the OT was for a person who had planted a vineyard to never enjoy its fruit.

However, there was always a promise, a promise that may have seemed hidden, but nonetheless a promise, of a different time. That the fruitless vine of Israel would be replaced by the True Vine, the Son of Man, Jesus the Messiah. From Psalm 80 (vs. 14-17):

14 Turn again, O God of hosts!
Look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine,
15 the stock that your right hand planted,
and for the son whom you made strong for yourself...
17 **But let your hand be on the man of your right hand,
the Son of Man whom you have made strong for yourself!**

In the NT, it is no longer ethnic Israel who is seen as God's vineyard, but instead the Kingdom of God. Finally, as we see in this passage in John's Gospel, and as throughout much of Scripture, Jesus becomes the New Israel and takes on the imagery of the True Vine. Follow along with me on page 1147 of your pew Bibles, as we look at the Gospel of John.

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser.

Jesus says, “I am the true vine.” This is the last of the seven “I am” sayings. Recall that last week Jesus said “I am” the way the truth and the life. The week before, Jesus said “I am” the door to the sheepfold. These are important sayings because they are **un**ambiguous. Jesus does not say, “I am kind of like...” but instead says, “I am.” Furthermore, these “I am” sayings indicate Christ's divinity, because they all hearken back to Moses' questioning of God's Name in the Book of Exodus, where God replied “I am who I am...say this to the people of Israel, ‘I am has sent me to you.’” So, again, Jesus is claiming to be God through His use of the phrase “I am.”

Also, notice the ordering of things in God's vineyard. First, God the Father is the vinedresser. He is the brains behind the operation. He is the one who does the cutting pruning, watering, and caring for the vines.

Secondly, the vineyard is the Kingdom of God. We see that especially in the two parables that Jesus tells that involve vineyards. The first, the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard is only told in Matthew's Gospel (chapter 20), and is probably one of the most difficult for us to accept. You remember, it is the one where the workers in the vineyard, whether they've worked all day or only one hour, get the same wage. So, we see the generosity of God in His Vineyard.

The other, The Parable of the Wicked Tenants which is told in all three Synoptic Gospels, makes more sense to our justice-oriented ears. The wicked tenants are punished for rejecting the Son of the owner. But, nonetheless, both speak of what God's Kingdom looks like. There will be generosity and there will be judgment.

Thirdly, Jesus is the true vine, He is what is called the “trunk” of the vine -- the thick vine upon which all the other branches of the vine grow and from which they receive their sap, gain their sustenance and strength.

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.

This is a somewhat confusing and much-debated verse. To fully understand it we have to go to the original language, Greek. First, Jesus is clear that He is only talking about branches that are “in me.” In other words, all of the branches that He speaks of in this verse are part and parcel of His followers. He is not talking about non-believers here. He is talking about the difference between those who are believers who have lost their way, who have become stilted or dormant in their walk with Christ, and those believers who are active and producing good fruit.

Those believers who are not bearing fruit, those He says He will “take away.” This word, in the original Greek is *aire* (ai [rei]) which can either mean to “take away” or can also mean to “lift up.” It is thought that, during Jesus’ time, vines were not normally put up on posts or hung on trellises, but allowed to grow along the ground. However, if a particular branch or portion of vine was not doing well, then the vinedresser would “lift up” that vine and place a rock underneath it for support, and wash the dirt from its leaves. This is a wonderful picture of God dealing with our sin...lifting us up, dusting us off, cleansing us with His grace and putting us in a better place to yield fruit. So, there is a possible double meaning here. In some cases, there may be some aspect of our lives that merely needs dusting off and placing in a place where we can receive more of the light of Christ. However, there is another meaning that relates to other aspects of our lives, something that must be removed, must be rooted out, must be cut off for the rest of our lives to bear fruit. So, this particular Greek word *aire* may mean either to “take away” or to “lift up.”

This also fits with the Greek word that is often translated “prune” in this verse, *kaqaiivre*i. The NT does not use the word prune, but the word actually means “to cleanse.” Thus, the method of “cleansing by pruning.” And that is also why Jesus

says, in the next verse, “Already you are clean.” Because Jesus’ disciples are made clean, pruned, by the daily reading of His Word.

But, notice that, regardless of whether you are bearing fruit or not, cutting is involved. If you are not bearing fruit, then there will be cutting to remove dead wood. If you are bearing fruit, there will still be cutting so that you might produce even more and greater fruit. And cutting is always painful. The Christian life is one of constantly being pruned by God the Father.

In preparation for this sermon, I consulted a couple of on-line agricultural services that had guidelines for pruning grape vines. One of the things that they are clear on is that first-time pruners often under-prune the vines. The Agricultural Extension expert at Oregon State University says, “When gardeners prune, they should remove the majority of wood produced in the previous season – until about 90 percent is pruned off.” In other words, most vinedressers do not prune enough. Wow...90%. That means that each new year we should be able to recognize only about 10% of our previous self. Whew!

“The most fruitful canes [main branches from the trunk] will be those that were exposed to light during the growing season. These are... as close to the trunk as possible [notice that, the branches that are the most fruitful are the closest to the trunk – Jesus]...For wine grapes leave about 20 to 30 buds per plant. In table grapes, leave 50 to 80 buds per plant.” All cane growth not “fruiting” close to the trunk is to be pruned off. Notice that also, that the finest grapes, used for wine, are those that have been pruned the most severe. Table grapes are produced from less severe pruning. Do you hear that? By analogy, the most productive Christians, the most joyful, the most in tune with Christ, are those that have undergone the greatest pruning, the greatest amount of adversity.

3 Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. 4 Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.

We are made clean and pruned daily by the reading of God's Word. Jesus says they are already clean because the disciples are abiding in Him through following Him in Word and action. "The allegory of the vine tended by the gardener, from which the sap flows into the branches, denotes in the first instance the inner fellowship of the disciples with Jesus, which rests on their utter dependence and in which they must abide and bring forth fruit (v. 4 ff.). It then denotes the intensive nurture of the community of disciples by God (v. 1 ff.)." Behm, *TDNT*, Vol. 1, p. 342.

We Christians, we followers of Christ, are not the trunk vine, nor are we the vinedresser, nor are we the vineyard. We are the branches or canes that grow from the vine and cannot live unless they are attached to the trunk vine and receiving sustenance from the trunk vine, Jesus Christ.

What kind of a bud on the vine are you? What kind of fruit do you produce? Do you feel that you have been pruned and pruned till you think you can't be pruned anymore? Then God the Father must really love you and want amazing things from you. If you continue to abide in Christ, your fruit will make a very fine wine.

Do you drift along with seemingly little pruning on behalf of the Lord? Or do you have much hardship in your life that is not from pruning, but from the fires of removal? The Lord is trying to prepare you to yield fruit. Turn to Him.

Are you the juice from a common table grape, or does the blood of Christ flow through your fruit, the kind that leads to the wine of sacrifice, repentance, and action? What kind of fruit would you like to produce? Let the vinedresser know in your prayers...be honest about who you are and who you want to be? But, most of all, stay close to the True Vine. Abide in the Vine. Remain in the Vine. For Jesus said, "I am the True Vine." *Amen.*