

## I am the True Vine

John 15:1-8

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May the words of my mouth and the ears of our hearts be open to the word of God this day. AMEN.

Tonight we have a the agriculture image of Jesus as the true Vine. Now I will be the first to admit that I am not the greatest grower of vines, plants, vegetables or fruit of any kind. When growing up my parents always had a large garden of tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, squash, beans, corn, potatoes and sometimes other things. As kids my sister and brother and I hated that garden. My parent's idea was that we three would get to tend to the garden and weed the garden. My theory was that the plants could grow on their own. We would plant them, fertilize them and then let them fend for themselves, until it was time to harvest the produce. However my dad didn't agree with my theories and so we spent many a summer days out in the hot sun tending to that garden of vegetables.

As an adult I have tried numerous times to grow some plants – even just tomatoes give me a hard time. At my first call out of seminary, I lived in a parsonage and only had a little bit of land, so I planted some tomato plants on the side of the house and did everything everyone told me to do. I bend them over as I planted them to get extra roots, I fertilized with Miracle Grow, I watered routinely, I pinched off those little suckers. I even found out later that my neighbor trying to be friendly was also watering and putting manure on the plants. So as you can imagine before long I had great big plants, easily over six feet tall. Green and lush, but not a single bloom on any of the plants. I had done everything I needed to do and yet there were no tomatoes.

A few years ago I tried again and that time the plants didn't even look that good and what was there was eaten by the rabbits and groundhogs.

Two years ago Shellene and I tried those upside down hanging tomatoes and that didn't really amount to much either other than a real pain trying to water them on a routine basis. And the one really good tomato we got off the two plants, believe it or not our dog ate right off the porch railing.

So with all that luck with growing plants what do you think I should do? I have literally ripped out the plants before in disgust and thrown them away, swearing that I will never try that again. I plant them with hope and each time I get disappointed.

Now compare that experience with how you think God is with us? How do you think God the vine grower feels when it comes to how much fruit we produce? This parable Jesus shares in John 15 is very similar to my experience with my tomatoes. God has planted with

hope and sown the seeds for his people in the covenant and over and over again a vine as sprung up a patriarch like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses or a prophet has shot forth like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel. But each time the vine grows and the produce is disappointing. Each time the produce is bad, sickly, ill ripened, or none productive at all. The entire Old Testament is a vicious circle of this experience. God plants the seeds of promise with his people and yet they grow distant and fall away from him, producing nothing. Over and over again God has tended to his garden and planted the seeds of goodness but people in our sinfulness fall away and do not produce what it is God is calling us to truly become.

And so in this "I am" passage, we get a clear message from Jesus that God is the vine grower, and Jesus is the one true righteous vine, and we are the branches of that vine, connected to God through him. We can only bear fruit if connected to him.

Now a growing vine is different then my example of tomatoes, because my tomato plants were store bought and when they didn't grow I just tore them out and started over the next year. But a grape vine, like Jesus would have been talking about, that was prevalent throughout the 1<sup>st</sup> Century countryside, and probably could have been seen from where Jesus was telling this story, is a little different. Vines take years to produce good fruit and they need constant pruning and cutting back, grafting and fertilizing.

Jesus says, I am the true vine. And my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. That sounds harsh but when it comes to growing grapes you don't want to waste the nutrients on branches that don't produce. So a vine grower would make the decision to cut off the branches that shot off that produce nothing so as not to sap the vine of all its energy. There were a lot of fruitless branches on God's vine in Jesus' day, all those who spoke of their faith but never lived it. Those who said they were faithful and believed but in their hearts they rejected God. There were those who thought only of themselves and keeping themselves pure while ignore the needs of people all around them. Times have not changed, we still live in a world that is filled with these branches of selfishness, pride, anger, greed. Sins abound cutting off and sapping the energy of people that say they are of Christ but yet do not bear fruit. And these branches are cut off.

But Jesus doesn't finish his example there. He continues on to talk about the branches that do produce fruit. And we would like to think that we are like these branches, branches that are trying our best to follow God, to be connected to God, and witness to God's glory and grace in all that we say and do. And we would think that this branches would be cared for and pampered, because they are producing fruit. But that isn't what that Gospel reading says. Jesus says, Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. Wow cut off or

pruned both sound pretty harsh, but there is a difference. By pruning before the sap begins to run each year in the Spring, a vine grower knows that the abundant fruit from the previous year will be even better the next year. Jesus says that we have been pruned already, He says in verse 2 that He has cleaned us by the word he has spoken. This is a play on words here because the same root word is used for pruning and cleansing. So God prunes so that we may do more ministries, more good works, more actions of the spirit. The more we learn and grow in the faith the more we strive to do more. The deeper in relationship we grow in God's love the more love we show to others. The more we dwell in the Word of God the more we yearn to understand. We are the branches that hopefully are bearing fruit and are pruned to bear more fruit.

This is what God seeks in us as the vine grower. But Jesus goes on in his metaphor, He says that he is the vine and we are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned. God as the vine grower has planted us and given us life, sustains us tends to us. But Jesus says the vine is also a necessity for those who don't want to be cast off and thrown into the fire. The vine is what supplies the branch with nourishment, with sustenance, with goodness and strength. The vine in this image is what gives us the power of salvation, the hope of eternal life. Without Jesus we would be lost and cast off into the fire. Without the sacrifice of Jesus our sins would remain and we would not be cleansed (or pruned), we would not be forgiven and redeemed to bear much fruit. Through the words of Jesus and at his command we come to the waters of baptism to receive the nourishing cleansing waters, we come to the table of the Lord to receive his body and blood offered up for us as our sacrificial lamb. We come receiving the essential life giving grace that flows from the father through the Son to us.

So today we hear that Jesus is the connection, The one who connects us to God. Are you plugged in? Grafted on hooked in. Do you have a link to the Father? I'm serious here, because without our connection through Jesus we are worthless. No matter how good you are you can never produce one single proverbial tomato on your own. We are reliant on that connection of Jesus Christ as the True Vine who cleanses us, prunes us, and nourishes us in all ways so that we are connected to the Father. May we seek to grow in that connection, to produce fruit and may it be produced abundantly. Amen.

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4

May the peace and Grace of God be with you this day and throughout the week to come.  
AMEN.