

John 15:1-8 [NIV]

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.² He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.³ You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.⁴ Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

⁵ "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.⁶ If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.⁸ This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

We're in John 15 today, if you'd care to take a Bible and turn back there. The gospel of John, Chapter 15.

I've mentioned before that when Paul, our middle son, was 6 years old, he, quite surprisingly to us, asked for an apple tree as one of his Christmas gifts. Now, this was a very unusual gift request, especially for a 6-year-old, which, even back then, clued us in to the fact that Paul would grow up to be a renaissance man — which, in fact, he has.

So, we ordered a tree. We ordered two trees, actually, for pollination purposes, from some tree farm in Georgia, I think it was. And a few days before Christmas, we got this long, thin box in the mail with *three* trees in it — they sent us an extra one by mistake.

So, hoping he wouldn't notice, we planted them in the back yard on the day before Christmas Eve, which I recently called "Christmas Eve Eve," but was quickly corrected and told that the correct term is "Christmas Adam," since Adam came just before Eve.

Anyway, we began reading up on apple trees: what to do for them, how to care for them, and all that. We had, growing up, several apple trees that my dad kept that always produced apples, but of course I never really cared about what he did to make them produce: what he sprayed them with and so forth.

I wish I had paid more attention, because even up to this day — over the past decade plus, we have only gotten a handful of apples from our three trees.

I have narrowed the reason for this down to either:

- over-pruning,
- or not spraying them with the right stuff,
- or spraying them with the right stuff but at the wrong time,
- or some sort of blight,
- or late frosts that kill all the blossoms,
- or some combination of these factors.

Just the same, any way you slice it, our results have been dismal. And then, you have to rake the leaves.

One year we actually did have a number of apples survive all that, but they became ripe over the two weeks we were on vacation. By the time we got home, either someone picked them all, or (and this is more likely the case) some animal got them. Either way, there were no apples left on the trees when we returned.

Now, maybe you, too, know, as I do, how it feels to be something of a frustrated gardener — not to be able to extract, from a plant, what it was intended to give.

I mean, we put a lot of time, money, research and work into those trees, yet a decade later still we have almost nothing to show for it — except for the fact that the whole experience has brought me closer to God in this one way: *I've come to realize that God is also a frustrated gardener.*

Yes. God knows very well how it feels to pour time and energy into a plant, only to have it fail to produce what it was supposed to produce.

Now you may say, "Ah, that can't be. God is the original 'green thumb.' I mean, He's the one who made all those plants in the first place."

And yes, that is all true.

But when the plant has a mind of its own, you see, then that's a whole different thing.

The plant — God's plant — is, of course, Israel. The nation of Israel was God's original vine. That's how the prophets describe her. Or, in some places, she's described as the vineyard.

But all those same prophets describe Israel as the vine that would not produce what she was intended to produce.

The psalmist in Psalm 80, Jeremiah 2, Ezekiel 5, Hosea 10, and on and on.

Israel is God's vine — but she's an unproductive and unruly one. Which is why Jesus comes, after all, and which is why He identifies Himself, here in John 15, as God's true vine.

Now, of course vines and vineyards were common in Jesus' day, so His use of vine language, combined with the well-known historical image of Israel as God's vine, was immediately recognized and received by Jesus' original listeners. They all spoke vineyard language.

But still, they had to be shocked at Jesus' declaration that *He, Himself, is the vine* — the *true* vine, which means that Jesus is claiming here to be Israel's fulfillment. He claims that He is the vine that will now produce what God the Father had wanted and intended Israel to produce all along, but Israel was never able to produce it.

You see, in the coming of Jesus to earth, there came to earth a vine that would be *trainable*, if you will. Jesus is the vine that would *finally do exactly* as God the Father — the "Gardener," He's called here — says to do.

Finally, there is a vine that will reveal God's glory to the world and *give the world life*.

Which, of course, was a big part of Israel's problem. They had come to think that, as God's vine, God's glory and God's life was only for them – for them to use for their own advantage, to gain power in the world.

And yet Jesus – even though Satan tempted Him otherwise right from the start – refused to claim God's glory for His own purposes. That is precisely one of the points of difference.

Israel, the original vine of God, took His blessing and tried to become something in the eyes of the world.

Jesus, however, chose to become nothing, you see? The Apostle Paul says He, "took on the nature of a servant."¹ Jesus did as God asked, which is why He is the real vine of God: He lives up to God's intention for vine-dom. Jesus becomes all that God's vine is supposed to be.

So, Jesus was a pretty different vine than Israel was.

And yet everything else about the vine, and life in the vine, remains the same.

For example, according to the Old Covenant, if you wanted to find God and thereby find and gain life, you had to go to the vine and then exist in the vine – you had to find God through Israel – through the sacrificial system, through the feasts, through the law. Imperfect as she was, Israel was still the vine – she was still the way to life and peace with God the Father.

But now, you see, with Jesus' arrival, people could come to God – people could find life and peace with God – through Him, through the person of Jesus Christ.

And those who will, Jesus says, those who will become branches of the vine.

God is the farmer, the vine-dresser, the chief executive officer of the vineyard.

Jesus has taken Israel's place as the vine. Jesus is the mechanism, the plant that connects people to God.

And all people who are in Jesus are the branches of the vine.

That's the image Jesus wants us to grasp about who He is in relation to God and who we can be in Him – in relation to Him in relation to God the Father.

Then Jesus goes on to talk about the branch's responsibility to bear fruit and about how God the Father, the Gardener, cuts off branches that don't bear fruit, and that He also prunes – He trims back – others, so that they bear even more fruit.

That whole discussion of Jesus there, the couple of sentences that he gives to that, has actually produced a lot of talk that has come to the church about fruitfulness, or productivity. There's a ton of stuff that the church has invested itself in to pursue fruitfulness and productivity – fruit-bearing. And it has become in many places the overwhelming focus of some branches, to the point that, some Christians or some branches, motivated either by a sincere desire to please God or maybe by a fear of getting cut off from the vine, really give lots of time and lots of energy to figuring out how they can be more fruitful – how they can increase their fruit production.

In fact, there are tons of books, tons of articles, tons of posts in Christendom about personal fruitfulness, and

family fruitfulness, and church fruitfulness – ideas and advice on how to do this or that or the other better.

There are lots of these practical sorts of resources out there that suggest which chemicals you should spray for better fruit and when to spray them, and how to feed, how to fertilize, how to recognize disease, how to encourage blossoms and, of course, how to avoid frozen blossoms.

There are tons of stuff out there about fruit production in Christendom.

And there's nothing wrong with that stuff. It can be insightful and quite helpful, *as long as we all remember this one thing* that Jesus says there in verse 4:

"No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine."

One more time: Jesus says, *"No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine."*

And then, here's a funny thing: right after Jesus says that, in the very same verse Jesus says it again, in a slightly different way. He sort of personalizes it – directs it to His listeners so they don't miss it. Jesus says, *"Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me."*

So that's two times He says it.

And then, Jesus says the very same thing again. In a slightly different way in the next verse, verse 5, Jesus says, *"apart from me you can do nothing."*

Now, unlike most preachers, present company included, Jesus is a very, very good communicator. It's not like Jesus ever struggled to convey His ideas – ever.

So why would you suppose Jesus felt the need to say the very same thing three times over in the course of two verses here?

I'm pretty sure it's because He knew very well that this is not only the most important part of the whole of His message here: it's also the part that people will fight against the hardest.

Jesus knew very well, after living with us humans for over 30 years, that we, the people, are full of will. We want to choose our own way. And, we are incredibly fallible. He knew this especially here, because this is just after experiencing one of his own disciples' rejection of Him.

Jesus knew even His friends, His followers, would fight Him on this, because this is, actually, the very core of humanity's sin problem – right here – the exaltation of self.

The central problem with our human nature is that we're rebellious, we're viciously independent, and we are self-centered. We push off anything that we feel restrains us from doing as we please – and we certainly don't feel that we need anybody's help to do anything – much less to grow fruit. "We can produce our own fruit. We'll get 'er done without any help from anyone else."

That is the mind-set of the fallen, carnal person, and the most irritating news a person who thinks like that can ever hear is this word from Jesus, stating the simple fact that, *apart from Him, we – can't – do – anything. Apart*

¹ Philippians 2:7

from Jesus, we – can't – produce – anything that is good and helpful and meaningful in God's Kingdom.

In our fallen state, we don't want to believe that.

Yet the reality is that we are not the vines that we think we are. Even the best of us – the most talented, the most intelligent, the most sensible, the strongest, bravest, healthiest, wealthiest or wisest of us – are nothing more than lowly branches that are completely dependent on Jesus to do anything of any real value.

We really don't like to hear that, and so we push that idea away, which is exactly why Jesus says what He does three times. He is the vine who provides everything, and apart from Him, we wither. We dry up and we blow away.

For a *rebellious soul*, that is the *worst* news in the world.

And *yet*, for a *repentant* soul these are some of the most hopeful words in Scripture, because when we recognize our desperate need for Jesus, that's when Jesus enters into His covenant with us and gives us all of His tremendous promises.

You see, Jesus isn't caught by surprise about our true state. He knows all there is to know – all the worst stuff about us, and yet He is not daunted in the least. He is completely confident that He can manage us, that He can feed us and grow us and develop us and turn us into useful branches.

He's not surprised at all, or disappointed at all, that apart from Him, or using Him only sporadically, we have not done better. He knows that! In fact, He knew all along that without Him we could do nothing. And yet, He still wants to remedy that situation. He wants to plug us into life – God's life – and consequently, into fruitfulness – all for God's glory.

That's what Jesus came to do: become the vine, the true vine, that connects God to people and people to God and to His life.

Ever since that first Christmas, for over 2000 years, this has been God's word of hope to humanity, and wow, is it desperately needed today!

If this virus has done nothing else good, it has humbled us at least to the point of remembering that we are not in control of anywhere near as much as we thought we were even one year ago.

Much to our chagrin, we have been made to realize that we, in fact, *don't* have it in us to make the crooked paths straight or the rough places flat.

Oh, we've thought we could. For far too long, we've thought, "Just let us get our hands on it! Let us put our social and political and economic pressures on the problem, whatever it is, and we'll have it sorted out in no time."

But that is simply not the case.

Too many in our world have convinced themselves that the branch can bear fruit on its own – whatever branch you want to talk about:

- The branch of our nation.
- The branch of freedom.
- The branch of wealth.
- The branch of education.

The branch of whatever economic theory you stand for.

All the branches of our world are full of plans and schemes for social betterment and human brotherhood and sisterhood and all that. We imagine ourselves to be this great people with these great ideas that, if given enough time and resources, can solve any problem.

And while it's true that, certainly, some branches are better than others, the fact is none will fix the world's problems – no branch is able to bear any sort of good fruit by itself.

Over and over Jesus says – He reminds, "Apart from me, you can do nothing."

Yet in our arrogance, we push the vine further and further away, utterly rejecting the notion that for all we are, we are but branches, and branches always wither and die when disconnected from the vine.

And yet, Jesus still holds out His hand to us – to us individually, to our families, to our church, to our people, to all our different races. He holds out His hand to our nation – for connection.

To those of us who have never known Him,
to those of us who've neglected Him,
to those of us who've ignored Him because He's said something we don't like,
to those of us who have pushed Him away,
to all of us, Jesus still offers connection, or maybe reconnection, to God – to the very source of life and good.

Jesus is calling even today, to any who will hear Him. He's saying, "Won't you listen to me? I am the vine. You are just branches. You want to make a difference in this world? You want to truly live? You want peace? You want success – by divine standards? Then abide in me."

He uses that interesting word. What does He mean? He means, "Talk to me. Listen to me. Find out what I want, what I think, what I've said in days past and what I'm trying to say even today. Get close to me. Hear me. Walk with me. Quiet yourself so I can speak. Don't let busy-ness crowd out devotion. Don't let life's pressures overtake spiritual attentions. Don't listen to a world that says you can do it on your own.

"Abide in me. If you want fruit – if you want anything good – you have to abide in me, because I am the vine. You are just branches."

What do your insides do – what do you feel in your gut – when you hear that you are "just a branch?"

How we respond to that assessment of Jesus speaks of the real condition of our hearts.

How do you respond to it? What rises up inside when you hear it?

Is it resistance, or is it relief? That will tell you where your heart is with God.

Jesus is the vine.

He is the sacred space in which God's people must dwell in order to be God's people.

He replaced the Temple, the Passover, and the Festival of Booths.

He is the fulfillment – the completion – of Israel.

He is every person's point of connection to the Gardener – and He's reaching out to every one of us in this very moment for that connection.

Would you let Him be your source of life and good and truth and fruit?

Would you let Him be the vine in your life?

We renew that connection and, if our hearts are in it, we actually strengthen that connection to the Vine through the vine of Holy Communion.

In this we not only remember, but we celebrate the reality that we need Jesus desperately – that apart from Him, we can do nothing.

That's part of what we're declaring here as we receive the bread and the cup. Only you and God know if you realize that and if any one of us really means what we say and do here in these moments. But He does know. Jesus does hear, and He invites us to Himself.

Service of Holy Communion

Closing Song: *I Need Thee Every Hour*

Benediction:

In the summer of 1962, surgeons in Boston successfully, for the first time ever, re-attached the arm of a 12-year-old boy that had been broken and completely separated from his body.

They grafted bone to bone, muscle to muscle and nerve to nerve, and in time, the boy recovered nearly complete use of that arm and his hand. The secret of the success, it has been determined, was the speed at which the two members were reunited, and the total completeness of the connections. The reunion had to happen fast, and no part could be held back. The very same thing is true with our union with Jesus, the Vine.

May we see that we are but branches, unable to produce anything good on our own.

May we act upon Jesus' call to Himself, who is the Vine.

May our attachment to Him be quick and utterly complete.

And so, may the world see God, and experience the life of God, in the fruit of our lives.