

## The Vine and the Branches

John 15:1-17

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One of the things we noticed the first time we drove into the Napa Valley was just how extensive the vineyards are in the valley, just how pervasive and spread out and how dominant they are on the landscape. Sure, we knew of the Napa Valley as the home of the Californian wine making scene, but we didn't realize just how much this valley is built around these beautiful vines.

If you haven't been here before, put it on your list of things to do once the current restrictions lift. You won't be sorry – this valley is gorgeous! And of course then you'll have time to stop in and visit us on a Sunday. We'd love to meet you in person if you're one of our friends watching from far away places.

Anyway, our passage today starts with Jesus speaking about vines just like these. Jesus often spoke using examples from the rural setting where he was teaching and preaching. And this image of the vineyard would have been very familiar to his 11 disciples who he was speaking to – remember it was 11 not 12 at this time, because this was the night before Jesus was to die on the cross, Judas had already left them to betray Jesus. And we find ourselves drawn into this poignant moment as Jesus speaks to his closest followers in the hours before he would be taken away from them.

And his message – “*Remain in me,*” Jesus says. No matter what happens, no matter who comes with clubs and swords, no matter what trials come later in life, *remain in me.*

So this morning we're going to think about what it means to remain in Jesus. Why don't we pray and ask God to teach us what that looks like, as we open the Bible. Will you pray with me?

*Our heavenly Father, help us this morning to know what it means to remain in Jesus, what it means to bear fruit, what it means to bring you glory. Father, we long to know Jesus more and more and to find our life in him, so will you be pleased to use this part of the Bible to teach us that today. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen*

## Remaining in Him

As I said before, Jesus' 11 disciples would have been very familiar with vines and vineyards.

Vineyards grew extensively throughout the land where Jesus and his followers lived – Israel and what we now call Palestine. This was the promised land, the land God had brought his chosen into people more than a thousand years earlier, the land flowing with milk and honey, but also with fruitful vines. One of the first images of the Promised Land is in the book of Numbers, when Joshua and the other scouts snuck into the land and returned with a cluster of grapes so big that it took two of them to carry it!

Grapevines all through the Old Testament represent the promise of fruitful abundance, of the joy of sharing in the fruit of the vine.

Perhaps that's why God chose the image of the vine to represent his chosen people, the nation Israel throughout the Old Testament. You see it there in Psalm 80:8

*You transplanted a vine from Egypt;  
you drove out the nations and planted it.  
<sup>9</sup>You cleared the ground for it,  
and it took root and filled the land.*

This vine represents Israel, whom God had rescued out of slavery in Egypt, and brought into the promised land, and planted them with the promise of them bearing abundant fruit. And they did -

*<sup>10</sup>The mountains were covered with its shade,  
the mighty cedars with its branches.  
<sup>11</sup>Its branches reached as far as the Sea,  
its shoots as far as the River.*

We see national Israel described as the vine or vineyard like this in Isaiah, and Jeremiah, and Ezekiel and Hosea. The vine became their national symbol so much that it was stamped on their coins (at one time), and it was immortalized in the

Second temple in this great golden artwork, a grapevine made of gold seemingly growing on the entrance into the Holy Place where God was said to dwell...

You get the picture? The vine was an icon that immediately brought to mind the nation Israel, perhaps like the bear that represents California. You can't miss what it means...

And so come back to John 15 with me. Because in v1, Jesus says:

*"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit..."*

You see it's true that Israel saw themselves as the vine that God had planted. But the story of the OT shows that God's people didn't bear the fruit that they should have. Rather than bringing glory to God, and representing him to the world by their godliness, instead they brought dishonour to God with their unfaithfulness, with their chasing after foreign gods, with their apostasy. Yes, they were the vine that God had planted, but their vine was not producing the kind of fruit that it should have.

And so when we read further into those OT verses about Israel as the vine, we see many of them ending with God's judgment against Israel. And we know from history that God's judgment came in the form of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires all but destroying God's chosen people, and carrying them into exile in the centuries before Jesus' arrival.

God's original vineyard was unfruitful, and so he cut it back until it was almost gone.

And now Jesus has come to establish a better vine, **the true vine**, one that won't run wild or get out of shape. This vine will bear the fruit that God intended for it. Because God the Father is tending the vine, and because the branches will be intimately connected with God's own Son, Jesus.

*"I am the **true** vine, [says Jesus] and my Father is the gardener. <sup>2</sup> 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."*

## Cutting Off

When we arrived here in the valley last November, it was the end of Fall (or Autumn as the rest of the world calls it – just saying). Around here they also call that time of year ‘*crush*’, which I’m guessing is the season when all the grapes are harvested and crushed to make wine...

Anyway right after crush was finished, the vineyards became a hive of activity.

The first thing we noticed was something quite unexpected. In the big vineyard just down the road from us, acres and acres of vines were torn out, and pushed into big piles where they were left to dry. And then in late January one day, we watched as the vineyard workers burned the old vines.

You see, people don’t grow vines for the aesthetic, not proper vineyard owners anyway. They grow vines in order to produce grapes. That’s their only use. You can’t harvest the wood and use it for anything useful. If it can’t produce grapes, it’s only fit for the fire.

And Jesus says the same about anyone who claims to be a follower of him, but isn’t bearing fruit... v2 – [God] *cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit.*

And the reason is this: branches on the vine can only bear fruit when they are attached to the vine. Look at v6:

*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.*

Jesus is saying, and this is the heart of what it means to be a disciple, Jesus is saying that to be a disciple we must be vitally connected to him, like a branch on a vine. If the branch is somehow disconnected from the vine – if it is accidentally broken off, or if it’s cut off, then it is no longer connected to the life-giving sap and nutrients and *life* that are transferred up through the roots and out into every branch. Without that connection it withers and dies.

As followers of Jesus, we must be vitally connected to him. Jesus is our source of life, and he is the way that we connect with God – that was our passage from chapter 14 a few weeks ago, wasn't it.

Jesus says here that to be a disciple means *remaining in Him*. It's a recurring theme all through our passage today. Being a disciple is about remaining in Jesus. Sticking with him. Being connected to him. Being nourished by him. Letting him be the lifeblood that flows through your veins, it's that kind of intimate connection. Because without that connection, Jesus says, we will wither and die and be thrown away because we aren't useful for anything.

You see it there in v4:

*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.*

I'm not sure who's listening today. But perhaps there's someone listening who is thinking, I'm not sure if I have that connection with Jesus. Or maybe I've let that connection slip. Please hear the words of Jesus today – Jesus wants you to remain in him. This is not a message of judgment, it's a message of salvation. Please, come to Jesus. Get connected with him. Or reconnect if you've let that slip.

Jesus's whole life was about bringing people back to God, making that possible – that was what the cross was all about. And so please, don't be too proud to come to Jesus. If your walk with Jesus has been unfruitful, or if your faith is withering, if you have become disconnected from Jesus, then do something about it today. Do what you need to do to *reconnect* with Jesus. And let us help you. Fill in our Connect Card, let us pray with you, let us get you attached to the vine so that you can grow and bear fruit in him...

Because that's what Jesus wants for us. Look at the second part of v2:

*"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. <sup>2</sup> 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.*

## Pruning

The second big thing we noticed in the vineyards over winter was the pruning. At the end of crush, the vineyards are tall and covered in leaves, they have this full and abundant look about them. But then sometime during winter, the vineyard workers come and trim all that growth back, until there are no leaves, and none of the long branches. Nothing is left but the bare stem or trunk which is supported on the stake. That's what it takes to make the vine truly fruitful...

It's an interesting metaphor for life, isn't it? Sometimes life is like the vineyards just before crush, heavy with low hanging fruit, a time of celebration and harvest and goodness. And sometimes life is like the season for pruning.

I can't help but wonder how God is using this season to prune us.

As he removes so many of the things that made our lives busy before, that filled up our lives before, as he removes things that we thought we depended on. Perhaps he is teaching us to remember that he is still there... That he still wants us to be connected with him in this modern world where we're so connected to everything and yet somehow connected to nothing...

How is God using this season to prune you?

Apparently during the growing season, as the branches grow out, expert vinedressers know exactly which branches to cut off in order to make the viable branches produce the most fruit. Because they want all the nutrients and all the energy to go into producing fruit, not growing endless branches and leaves. And so the experts trim and snip and cut and prune even the growing branches so that they will produce *even more fruit* than they could have without the pruning.

In Hebrews 12, the writer says this:

*God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. <sup>11</sup> No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.*

However God is pruning us, it is for our good. It might be painful, but it will produce a harvest in us. A harvest of godly fruit – righteousness it says in Hebrews. It might be God refining your character, or your witness, or patience, it might be God teaching you to rely on him not your stuff, it might be God training you to trust him with your health.

It might be God growing in you any of the fruits of the spirit we see in Galatians 5 – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

I don't know how God is pruning you but I'm seeing the ways he is pruning me as I listen to him speak to me through his word each day.

And it can be painful. And looking back on other times of pruning in my life, they were painful, but I'm so thankful for them now that I can see how God has used them to grow me...

Because through those struggles, God is shaping us into the sons and daughters that we will be for all eternity. He is restoring us to the way that we were always meant to be – as dearly beloved children of God, made in his image and made to live in a way that brings him glory.

Because that's the ultimate purpose for God's pruning of us. It's God's ultimate reason for persisting with us through all our unfaithfulness, just like OT Israel. God remains with us and for us, because when we turn back to him, when we once again worship our creator, when the world is set aright like that and God's name is hallowed, that is ultimately what brings God glory. That he should be worshiped as he deserves!

And that's what Jesus says in v8:

*This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.*

God is glorified when disciples of Jesus live fruitful lives.

It's that simple. God is glorified when the gospel makes a difference in us. When his word trains and rebukes and corrects us. All of those things bring God glory.

And if the Westminster Confession is right, that is the chief end of man – to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

So the question to ask ourselves is, how are we bringing glory to God? In what ways are you inviting God to prune you, as you listen to him in his Word, the Bible? In what ways are you seeking to live a life connected to Jesus? What are you asking God for? Specifically he says in v16 – are you asking God to bear the kind of fruit in you that will last?

I've been praying for us as a church, that God would use this time to prune us. None of us ever expected to be meeting like this, online and unable to be together face to face. But I've been praying that God will use this time to prune us, and to show us what really matters when it comes to being a church. That despite the circumstances we can bring him glory in the way that we bear fruit as individuals. And I've seen some of that fruit already over the last few weeks as I've witnessed you care for one another, disciple one another, and pray for one another. And as you've done those things for me...

But I've also had another prayer for us as a church, that God would use this time to bear another kind of fruit through us that will bring him glory, a fruit that lasts forever. And that is the fruit of sharing Jesus with those who are not connected with him. The fruit that is borne when we love someone so much that we would lay down our lives for them, risk our reputation with them by sharing Jesus with them. Because our passage reminds us that one of the greatest gifts in this world is to be called a friend of Jesus – we see it there in v14. And as a church we are called to go and invite people into friendship with Jesus. To share God's love and mercy, his gift of life in Christ.

Because that is what Jesus sends us out to do as his friends – that's what he chose the first disciples for, and it's what he commissions all of us to do – to go and make disciples of people everywhere.

So I want to finish with that thought from Jesus there in v16... Jesus says:

*You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.*

Will you join me in praying that God would take us and use us to bear fruit that lasts?

## Prayers

Father God,

We thank You for Your deep and everlasting love for us. We thank You that You desire relationship with us, that we should abide with You always.

May we be filled with the knowledge of Your will with all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that we may walk in a manner worthy of the LORD, to please You, Father, in all respects.

This seems to be a time of pruning, and we trust that much good fruit will follow this time of sorrow and suffering for so many.

May we be receptive and receive Your pruning as a gift to grow in our ability to love others more. And, to bring glory to You.

May our lives be changed as a result of this time of sheltering in place. And may we bear fruit in every good work and *increase* in the knowledge of who You are God, and Your great love for us.

May our hearts and eyes be focused on You, so we may love others as You have shown us.

May we cling to You as the branch connected to The Vine.

We pray for Your hand to continually be on our Church, worldwide and here in Yountville. We pray for our Pastor's family, the Bidwells. Please give them strength and joy during this difficult season where so much rests on their shoulders.

Thank you for the pastoral staff at our church and their tireless love and encouragement for our people.

We pray for the leaders of our Country and local governments. Give them hearts and wisdom to serve the people and maintain our freedoms.

Thank you for the first responders and the health care workers. We pray for their safety and well-being.

During this time may we be diligent to abide in You for strength and wisdom; to express our gratitude, and to share the love of Jesus with others. May many come to know You as Sovereign God and the lover of their souls. May this be fruit that glorifies You and be a blessing for all eternity.

Amid confusion and hardship, You are still on Your throne and Your love for all of us is everlasting.

Thank you, Father.

It is in the Holy Name of Jesus and for His sake, we pray. Amen!