

Sermon April 28, 2024

One of the fascinating things Jesus does in John's Gospel is a series of statements that help explain who he is. I am the Bread of Life. I am the Way and the Truth and the Life. I am the Good Shepherd. I am the Light of the World. I am the Resurrection and the Life. And then there's the one we hear today: I am the Vine.

But there's a crucial difference between the other "I Am" statements and this one. Today we hear a follow-up statement after Jesus says "I am the Vine." He immediately says "...and YOU are the branches." Whereas the other statements are simply to help them understand who HE is, this one tells them in no uncertain terms, who THEY are to be.

The vine who comes out of the root of Jesse, King David's father – establishing Jesus' lineage as descended from the line of David – continue to branch out, and branching out is precisely what the disciples are expected to do, to spread the story and the words of Jesus far and wide.

That vine metaphor works so well, because all those who were listening that first time knew how things worked in vineyards. All we know, we 21st Century people is that we go to the store and buy a bottle of wine. But I had a parishioner at a church in Leesburg who grew grapes. His vineyard supplied wine grapes to several vintners in Loudon County. And I'd always know that it was pruning season because he'd come to church with a brace on his right hand, the hand that would hold the pruning shears, and he'd have scratches on his arms and he'd look tired. "Pruning season?" I'd say. "Pruning season," he'd reply. The timing was critical, and not doing it, even when his arthritis was flaring up, was

not an option. This is what people who have vineyards know: part of the work of the one who plants the vine is to make sure that only productive branches are kept. Every year the vineyard owner prunes the branches hard. The obvious reason is that it's silly to keep unproductive branches on the vine. They just take up space. But the less obvious reason is that the vine keeps sending moisture and nutrients out to all the branches that spring out from it, whether or not the branch is producing. It's a waste of the vine's resources to send the moisture and nutrients to a branch that is essentially dead. It is withered and can no longer produce good fruit. And in a strange way, it's unkind to the vine to ask it to keep sending energy to dead branches.

Jesus wants his disciples to carry on the work – to continue to produce good fruit, in the parlance of the vineyard. He expects them to be fruitful. He warns them that if they are not fruitful, they will wither away and get pruned off in the next season. As with so many things Jesus says in conversation with the disciples, we want to hear a little more, because the idea of getting lopped off with pruning shears isn't a happy one.

Yes, it seems a bit frightening. After all, we don't spend every waking moment preaching the Word and taking care of folks. Are we candidates for pruning that will be chopped off and burnt with the other dead brush? Will Jesus' care for us get chopped off if we don't meet some threshold of productivity?

The answer comes quickly and clearly: abide in Jesus and he will abide in you, and you WILL be fruitful. Let me take a moment to explore that word "abide" because understanding it is going to be helpful in just a moment. We've

heard the word dozens of times in Scripture, but I'd bet you haven't a clear picture of what it means. It's not complicated: it simply means "stay with" or "continue with." If we are to abide with Jesus, it doesn't necessarily mean to be doing a whole bunch of stuff with the Lord. It means we stay with Him, continuing to hear in our hearts what He has to say. It means we follow what he says, but it's not the kind of verb that implies action. Instead, it reflects a manner of BEING: making oneself as open as possible to be present. If you had a grandmother who said "I can't abide that person," she was saying "I just can't be in that person's presence; I can't tolerate the way they are." If you CAN abide someone, you want to be in their presence.

Se we can abide with Jesus. Yes, there will be times when we are more fruitful than other times. Yes, there will be times when we feel a lack of energy. But if we keep connecting with Jesus, we will be bearers of good fruit. Good fruit might be making sandwiches for the Hope Center. Good fruit might be praying for someone. Good fruit might be calling someone who is lonely.

The key to this call to fruitfulness is very simple: love one another, as God loves us.

There's no magic to this, just as there's no magic to pruning in the vineyard. You just do it, for the good of us all. The more love, the more fruitfulness among us, and isn't that the best thing you can imagine?

Amen.