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John 15:1-8

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THE TRUE VINE

Back in the 70's when I worked as an engineer, one assignment took me to Germany for three months. During our time there, one of the highlights we enjoyed was taking the Rhine River cruise. Winding our way along the river we were enchanted with the vineyards that line the hills on both sides of the Rhine. Vineyards are now quite common in our own backyard, of course. It seems that no matter where you travel in California, lush vineyards dot the landscape.

The metaphor of vine and vineyard occupy our attention as we turn to John 15. The question to contemplate is: How do we live a fruitful life? The gospel of John records two farewell discourses of Jesus. The first comes at the end of chapter 14, with the Lord telling his disciples, "Get up, let us go from here." The second begins in chapter 15. One wonders why this admonition by Jesus to leave was placed in the middle. Why didn't some editor take it out later to make it less confusing?

Several opinions are offered to explain this. Some say the two discourses are different versions, or the first discourse is the original record while the second is John's own meditations. Perhaps Jesus had intended to leave but his love for the disciples was so great, and the truth they needed so crucial, that he continued talking to them. Chronology was not a priority for John. One compelling suggestion is that Jesus and the disciples left the upper room and continued their conversation in the streets of the old city. When they passed by the temple and saw some actual vines or frescoes of vines, Jesus took the opportunity to address them again. We can imagine Jesus pointing at a vine or a picture of vine and saying:

"I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit. (John 15:1-2 NASB)

Here we encounter the last of the seven "I am" statements in this gospel. Jesus is the bread of life, the light of the world, the door, the good shepherd, the resurrection and life, the way, the truth and the life. Jesus is the true light, the true way, the true life, and, as we see in our text, the true vine. Jesus identifies his Father as the vinedresser or farmer. Here the Son is being subordinate to the Father even though the focus is on the Son. The implication is that the disciples are the branches or vine tendrils. The branches derive their life from the vine; the vine produces its fruit through the branches.

The vine/vineyard motif was common in ancient religion. Scholars have found parallels in a wide range of literature. But most importantly, this was a frequently used metaphor in the OT, where we find Israel portrayed as a vine:

**For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel
And the men of Judah His delightful plant (Isa 5:7).**

God "removed a vine from Egypt;" He "drove out the nations and planted it" (Psalms 80:8 NAS95S).

Both Jeremiah and Isaiah refer to Israel as a "choice" vine (Jer 2:21; Isa 5:2) Hosea uses the adjective "luxuriant" (10:1), while Isaiah describes the vine as "delightful." God's vineyard, his people, were a delight to him. He loved his vineyard and loved to tend it, as we see again in Isaiah:

**Let me sing now for my well-beloved
A song of my beloved concerning His vineyard.
My well-beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill.
He dug it all around, removed its stones,
And planted it with the choicest vine.
And He built a tower in the middle of it
And also hewed out a wine vat in it (Isa 5:1-2)**

God had great hopes that his vineyard would produce wonderful fruit. However, the vineyard of Israel ended up producing worthless fruit and causing God great heartache, as we see in Isaiah and Jeremiah:

**Then He expected it to produce good grapes,
But it produced only worthless ones. (Isa 5:2)**

"What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it?

Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes did it produce worthless ones?" (Isa 5:4)

**How then have you turned yourself before Me
Into the degenerate shoots of a foreign vine? (Jer 2:21)**

**Thus He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed;
For righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress. (Isa 5:7)**

God could not restore his vineyard. Finally, after years and years of trying, he destroyed it and judged his people.

"So now let Me tell you what I am going to do to My vineyard:

I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed;

I will break down its wall and it will become trampled ground.

"I will lay it waste;

It will not be pruned or hoed,

But briars and thorns will come up.

I will also charge the clouds to rain no rain on it." (Isa 5:6-7)

God destroyed his beautiful garden, his delightful and choice vine Israel, but not quite. Isaiah spoke of future hope for the vine:

**Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse,
And a branch from his roots will bear fruit (Isa 11:1)**

Psalm 80 connects God's vine and this shoot to the son of man, the term used in John to apply to Jesus:

**Look down from heaven and see, and take care of this vine,
Even the shoot which Your right hand has planted,
And on the son whom You have strengthened for Yourself. (Ps
80:14-15)**

Let Your hand be upon the man of Your right hand,

Upon the son of man whom You made strong for Yourself. (Ps 80:17)

God had planted Israel as a choice vine to bear fruit for himself. However, Israel had forgotten its purpose, so this vine was removed. Jesus is now the vine that fulfills what Israel was designed to do, the true vine that bears good fruit. Israel was God's first-born son. Jesus is now the true Son of God. In John, we find the author redefining and replacing many of Israel's most significant themes, symbols and metaphors with Jesus, and such is the case here. Jesus had already replaced the temple, the symbols of the Jewish feasts, and Moses, and now he replaces Israel as the locus of the people of God. The people of God are the branches of the true vine. Every time we pass by a vineyard, every time we partake of the fruit of the vine we are reminded of Jesus as the true vine and his people as the branches.

Having a vineyard and producing quality grapes demands a lot of work. The farmer doesn't just plant his vine and sit back waiting for the harvest. He tends his garden by carefully pruning each branch. Jesus is the true vine, and God is the farmer who still tends the vineyard of his people. His main work is pruning, a work which takes two forms: He prunes every fruit-bearing branch so that it can produce more fruit, and he removes every unfruitful branch.

The word for "take away" can mean "take up" or "lift up." Some claim that it implies that the branches are supported, lifted up to gain exposure to the sun. In John, the word is used in this way eight times, but most of the time, 16 times to be exact, it means to "take away," which is the meaning here. The farmer gets rid of dead wood so that the living, fruit-bearing branches might have more room for growth.

The branches that are pruned are "in Me," which means that this is addressed to professing believers, those who are part of the visible body of Christ. The branches that have life and are producing fruit are pruned for further growth. However, some people become part of the church but do not persevere. Eventually it becomes obvious that the life of Christ, the life of the vine, never pulsed through them, so they are taken away.

Every year I prune my fruit trees, tending to both the living branches and those that have died. The dead ones are obvious; they don't put forth leaves or blossoms in the spring. Those branches are not trimmed; they are cut all the way back to the trunk.

God's goal is fruit-bearing people. That means as "branches in Christ" we will undergo the loving but painfully sharp knife of the farmer. God will not allow his vineyard to grow randomly and out of control.

At the time when my first child was born, my identity and my time were wrapped up in my athletic ability. I was at the top of my game and felt that a professional team would be calling any day. One Saturday I agreed to play for a friend's rugby team, and God took his knife to my shoulder. My separated shoulder did not heal properly and a year later had to have surgery. I hated it. How dare God limit me and take away something I loved so much? But his pruning care was one of the best things that ever happened to me. It changed my priorities, focus and identity. Ever since when I have sprained ankles, broken bones, knee surgery, or tore Achilles tendons, I know that it is God limiting me and redirecting my life. I hate it, but every time it is good. Both pruning and taking away are painful processes, but I'd opt for pruning.

Perhaps God has pruned or is pruning your life or ministry through an illness, your work situation or the need to help a family

member. Maybe you have had to redirect your time due to getting married, staying married, or having children. It is all intended for good.

Often God asks us to be part of the pruning process by making decisions between better and best. There are so many things we would like to do, so many ways to use our gifts and help people, but maybe God asks us to choose one thing out of five. That is a painful, hard process. In this transition time of our starting a ministry in Willow Glen, I believe that God is pruning us here at PBC Cupertino. We can't do everything we have done in the past. Pruning is the unpleasant but necessary process for future growth both here and in Willow Glen.

Here is the spiritual principle to remember: A fruitful life includes painful pruning. God does not use the pruning knife carelessly or in vain.

Jesus now goes on to further describe several other aspects of the fruitful life. It begins by responding to the word of Jesus. This is the point of verse 3:

"You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. (15:3)

This is what made the disciples "clean" and what makes us clean. The word here for clean is the same word translated "prune" in the last verse. When Jesus washed the disciples' feet in chapter 13, he told them they were all clean except for Judas: "Jesus said to him, 'He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you.' For He knew the one who was betraying Him; for this reason He said, "Not all of you are clean" (13:10-11).

We might recall what Paul wrote about husbands loving their wives like Jesus: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory" (Eph 5:25-27 NAS95S).

Jesus cleanses us by initiating his word of salvation. In a similar way, husbands cleanse their wives by initiating speech.

Remember what Paul wrote the Romans: "we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection" (6:5 NAS95S). And also: "you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree" (Rom 11:17 NAS95S).

When we believe in his word we have become united, grafted into the vine of Jesus. This is the beginning of a fruitful life.

Next we see that the fruitful life continues by abiding or remaining in the vine.

"Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. (15:4-5)

Here now is the heart of the matter. In chapter 14 we learned the Jesus abides in the Father and the Father in Jesus. We also learned that the Father and the Son abide in the believer – they live in the "room" of our heart. Now the exhortation is to "abide" in Jesus. The word appears seven times in our text. "Abiding" language replaces

the “love” language we saw in the last chapter. Abiding is the secret to a fruitful life.

In this context, “fruit” probably means all manner of things – fruit of the Spirit, obedience, new converts, love, Christian character – the life of Jesus himself reproduced through the lives of the disciples.

No branch has life in itself but is dependent on the life of the vine. The vine provides everything that is needed to grow internally and produce fruit. The branch is dependent on what the vine provides. It does not have to worry about producing fruit, only to abide in the vine. The rest is the work of the Gardener.

It is difficult to define or describe abiding in Jesus. The visual concept is easy to grasp, but it is hard to translate this into our spiritual life. My wife and I have been married almost 33 years. We know each other very well, our strengths and weaknesses, our idiosyncrasies and habits. We can live together, do business together, take care of the house and enjoy our children, grandchildren and friends. However, if we don’t take the time to be together, to connect, to abide, our relationship begins to become unfruitful. We get uptight with each other, we misunderstand words and motives and grow resentful. But when we take the time to connect, our relationship bears fruit. We have joy, peace and love. Our relationship becomes intimate, other-focused, and enjoyable. This abiding connection takes place internally, not externally by deciding our roles or splitting up the to-do list. Often it is words spoken and received in the heart that “cleans” our relationship.

Our relationship with Jesus is similar. We can do things for Jesus and talk about him. We can care for people and tend to the church. But we can do all of this without connecting to or abiding in Jesus. We pursue ministry and life externally, without the life of the vine giving us internally what we need. The result of not abiding is a fruitless life, and its characteristics are obvious – controlling, demanding, stress and all the manifestations of the deeds of the flesh that Paul talks about in Galatians 5. Apart from Jesus we can do nothing.

What is true of us individually is true of us corporately. A church whose leadership and congregation are trying to produce the life of Jesus in their own strength, without the life of the vine, runs on external programs, guilt and control. The programs might look great, the music might be spectacular, the teaching might draw hundreds, but it lacks the life of Jesus and eventually it will fail.

I find that abiding in Jesus and not depending on my own strength is one of the most difficult things to incorporate into my life. God might give me a desire, a vision, a passion, an excitement for something, but without hardly noticing I begin to implement his vision in my strength. The result is always the same: I get stressed out, I try to force the action, over-extend myself and get frustrated. Finally, Jesus gets my attention and I have to let it go. He says to me, “So John, can we start again and this time do it together?” We need the constant reminder that without Jesus we can do nothing. We are the branches, not the vine.

It isn’t just important but imperative that we abide, that we spend time hanging out with Jesus, that we sense his abiding presence in our life if we are to be fruit-bearing branches. We are to abide frequently so that we grow to abide constantly. Our spiritual life becomes dry without abiding.

The next principles we see in our text points again to the warning of verse 2. The fruitful life will diminish if we are not abiding. The fruitful life will die if we do not continue to abide.

“If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned. (15:6)

This is an obvious truth in the world of horticulture. Our dog occasionally gets excited and runs through the bushes, breaking a branch. How do I become aware that the branch is broken? Because it turns brown. At that point I have to cut it off and throw it away.

The burning of branches is an allusion to Ezekiel 15:1-8, where Ezekiel warns Israel that if a vine failed to produce fruit, its wood was good for nothing but the fire. Fire is a symbol of judgment. It attests to the uselessness of what it consumes. If we are not abiding, if we do not have the life of Jesus flowing through us, the color fades, the branch has no fruit and it’s only fit to be thrown into the fire. I am not saying that we can lose our salvation. What I am saying is that either we are abiding or dying. We can’t be cleansed and we can’t bear fruit merely by going to church. We can’t have the life of Jesus in a halfway manner. We can’t be branches hanging on two different trees. We can’t be fruitful if we are not attached to the vine.

Next we see that a fruitful, abiding life leads to fruitful prayer.

“If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. (15:7)

We abide in Jesus and his words abide in us. The word of Jesus is not only cleansing and transforming, it also becomes the basis and content of our prayer life. As our lives are brought into conformity to Christ by his word, our prayers are brought into conformity to his wishes by the same word. When we pray along the lines of Jesus’ words we can expect that God will respond. This is what Jesus said in the last chapter: “Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it” (14:13-14 NAS95S).

One of the advantages of studying the gospels is being immersed in the words of Jesus. As I have studied John’s gospel over the past couple of years, I find myself repeating verses in my mind and praying them in my heart: “I am the bread of life” – feed me; “I am the light of the word” – enlighten me. Last week we talked about Jesus’ peace instead of world peace. I found myself praying for Jesus’ peace all week long.

Of course we can do this with any Scripture, since all of Scripture is the word of God. Many people have been transformed internally by praying the Jesus prayer over and over: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.” Usually we start our prayers with our shopping list of our needs and wants and fears. That is not a bad thing, but praying along the line of “My words” enhances a fruitful, abiding, transforming relationship with Jesus.

Finally, we see in verse 8 that a fruitful life glorifies the Father and identifies his people as his.

“My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.” (15:8)

What is the purpose of a fruitful life? So that we can be successful, happy and fulfilled? No. The purpose of a fruitful life is to glorify the Father. This is the ultimate goal. In John, Jesus’ constant prayer is to glorify the Father. God is glorified in or through the Son (13:31; 14:13; 17:4). The glory of God is the central theme of the entire discourse – the opening words in 13:1 and the final prayer in 17:1. The fruitfulness of believers brings glory to the Father through the Son, the true vine. The Westminster Shorter Catechism asks, “What is the chief

end of man?" The answer is, "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."

Not only is God glorified, but the fruit of the vine is what identifies and characterizes the people of God. It's not large church buildings or successful programs, what we wear or what we sing. What marks the people of God is fruit: love, joy, peace. It doesn't matter what we believe or what we do if we are not a loving, fruitful people. The people of God are designed to be a sweet, delightful vineyard, a blessing to the community. A fruitful marriage is a blessing to the neighborhood. Just as we are naturally attracted to the vineyards that dot the hills, so people should be attracted by what they see in the life of the church. God's goal for his vineyard is fruitful lives. And that is not dependent on being married, wealthy, healthy, or successful. A fruitful life is dependent on abiding in Jesus.

What a wonderful morning to come to the Lord's Table. What a wonderful text to ponder as we partake together the produce of the vineyard. As we break bread, symbolizing the body of Christ, and drink from the cup, symbolizing the blood of Christ, we enter into the mystery of abiding in Christ. Together as his vineyard we draw upon the life of the true vine and we are reminded that without him we can do nothing.

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