

*"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 does bear fruit he prunes that it may bear more fruit.  
 Already you are clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Abide in me and I in you.  
 As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.  
 I am the vine; you are the branches.  
 Whoever abides in me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.  
 If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers;  
 and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.  
 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.  
 By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.  
 As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Abide in my love.  
 If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love,  
 just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.  
 These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."*

**John 15:1-11**

**"I Am the True Vine, and My Father is the Vinedresser"**

Pastor Stephen Ridge

We noted last week that as the turmoil at table mounted at the Last Supper, Jesus began talking to the men around him about the temple, his Father's house. It was a place full of rooms and Jesus talked about going away to prepare places for his disciples, and returning to gather them in and get them safely there, "...that where I am, you may be also...you know the way to the place where I am going." Jesus told them. Which didn't make a lot of sense because the temple, the Father's house was not even a mile away from where they were having dinner. So Thomas expressed confusion about where Jesus was going and how anyone could get there.

And far from giving street directions, Jesus went all existential with the disciples: "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me. If you had known me,*" Jesus says to his closest friends, "*you would have known the Father as well, and from now on, you do know him and have seen him.*" So it begins to dawn on everyone there that Jesus is not talking about the old, familiar temple some number of blocks away, but about a different kind of journey, a personal journey where Jesus will lead the disciples and us after them to some kind of room, a space we will share with God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

And the path to that space, those rooms, that sanctuary becomes clear, Jesus tells us, as we "*Believe in God, believe also in me.*" he said. We make the decision to trust Jesus for forgiveness, to love him for what he's done for us, and to do what he says, and Jesus promised that each of us will "*be loved my Father and I will love him and disclose myself to him.*" It is a relationship where learning is not a function of personal smarts, but rather we learn about God, we grow close to God to the extent we believe what he's already told us.

"*If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him, and make our home with him.*" Jesus taught. So the "place" Jesus is preparing for us to share with God is not somewhere, out there! The room where we and God will dwell together is inside us. Jesus promised, "*If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father and he will give you another Helper, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive...*" but "You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you." Jesus said.

By that time the air starts to get a little thick in the Upper Room and Jesus makes an abrupt decision: "*Rise, let us go from here.*" So down the stairs, and down the street, and out the city gate they go, out onto the slopes of Mount Olive and they begin to make their way through the vineyards and orchards toward Garden of Gethsemane. And I imagine it was in a vineyard that Jesus begins to teach them the same truths using a different picture: "*I am the true vine,*" Jesus told them, "*and my Father is the vinedresser.*"

It is not a new picture in the overall scheme of things. Seven hundred years before, Isaiah had sung a song tying together vineyards and love relationships much as Jesus would do for his disciples on the last night they were together. The old prophet had sung: "*Let me sing a song for my Beloved, my love song concerning his vineyard. My Beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.*" And the tragic case in all the vine and vineyard songs that appear in the prophets is that in old Israel the vines never bore and the vineyards always failed. In Jonah 4, Isaiah 5, Jeremiah 2, Ezekiel 15 and so on, old Israel had never flourished, never borne fruit for God.

So that night on Mount Olive, a very fertile hill, Jesus promised a new ending to old Israel's sad vineyard stories: "*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 does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.*" It was a picture seen everywhere around the ancient Mediterranean. Untamed, uncared for grapevines became a tangle of brushy, woody branches bearing tiny, bitter, inedible grapes. Grapes that graced peoples' tables and filled peoples' wineskins came from vines where the branches were relentlessly thinned and pruned, and the stalks were tied and suspended into neat, orderly, cultivated rows. Vine keeping was an art and a labor of love.

Still there was a chilling note to Jesus' promise that night. Judas, one of the original twelve branches on this new vine had already been taken away, and Peter, a flawed but fruitful branch, would be severely pruned and humbled before the night was done. Still Jesus reassured the men gathered around him, *"You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you."* In other words, real faith in the gospel promises gets us to a place where we will all ultimately bear fruit in the vinedresser's care.

Jesus exhorts them *"Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, 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."* The point of the picture is that spiritual fruitfulness doesn't grow from a religious orientation or religious associations. Rather it grows from living in and making time and place for a real relationship with Christ himself.

The men around Jesus in the vineyard that night had lived with him night and day over hill and dale for three years. But, beginning that night, they would have to trust him, seek him, know him, and love him without constantly physically seeing his face and hearing his voice and traveling in his wake. Like us today, they would have depend on an invisible Spirit and open their hearts and read the Scriptures and remember their gospel, and live out what they knew of Jesus, sight unseen and voice unheard.

And Jesus was teaching them, and us, that abiding in him sight unseen is both entirely possible and absolutely necessary. He warned them, and us, *"If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers, and they gather the branches and throw them in the fire and they are burned."* Some commentators want to take this statement as mere agricultural imagery, not to be applied to people. But to my mind, Jesus is clearly warning us that to fail to trust, and seek, and know, and love him is to risk the flames of hell.

It's important to stipulate that the operative word in Jesus' command here is *"abide."* He's not telling us to try harder or to do better or be some sort of person we don't even know what it is. He's telling us to treat him like *"the pearl beyond all price"* in the parable, that treasure that you'll trade everything else you have to lay your hands on it. Because he is that valuable, he is that necessary. So he wants us all, in our own way, to make time and place for him, to listen to his words, and to tell him what burdens our hearts.

The warning is followed by a promise: *"If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will and it will be done for you."* The Greek term for *"words"* here is different than the *"word"* we've heard that made us *"already clean."* That word was *"logos,"* the big, wide gospel that saves our souls if we ever really believe it. The *"words"* Jesus wants abiding in us, rattling around in our hearts are *"rhemata,"* the details, the particulars that make any real relationship work.

Not every word a person speaks is existential. But Jesus wants us to spend enough time with him, so that his parables, his stories get woven into our thoughts and affections, the birds of the air, the lilies of the fields, the father gazing out his doorway, waiting for his prodigal, the tax collector hanging from a tree branch, waiting for an invite to lunch, the woman holding onto to the edge of Jesus' robe, hoping she can get healed without anyone noticing, the mourners at the wake, laughing when Jesus told them the girl was only taking a nap. These are the *"words,"* the details that lend power to our prayers, if we ever let them abide in our hearts.

*"By this,"* Jesus said, *"is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, as I have kept the Father's commandments and abide in his love."* Or as Isaiah put it: *"My Beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill."* We are that vineyard, and Jesus is our Beloved, if only, ever we will make the time of day for him as we would for anyone we truly love.