

“Abide in the Vine” A sermon by Lee Ireland  
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church  
April 29, 2018 Fifth Sunday of Easter  
John 15:1-8

Let us pray together: **Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.**

Vines, branches, pruning, fruit. I immediately think of vineyards with the trellised vines I've seen so often in the wine regions we have visited. In the Spring, we've seen the vines just begin to bud. You can see a few leaves on very green stems. In the Summer, we've seen lush green leaves with green hanging fruit. In the Fall, we've seen the heavy, ripe fruit and the burgundy, yellow and green leaves on the vines. Of course, in the Winter, gone are the branches and leaves leaving stark, bare, dark – almost black - grape vines pruned of all branches and leaves.

This metaphor about the vine and fruit is part of the last teachings of Jesus. He tells this story to his disciples to teach them that they must stay close to him, that they can do nothing apart from him. A message we need to take seriously today.

Listen to this story. The grape branch struggled mightily to hold on to the four huge, tightly packed clusters of grapes. That fruit emitted strong wafts of delicious aroma, and the look of the grapes seemed to insist on being picked and eaten. The branch could not hold back the self-confident satisfaction deep within the nuclei of each cell. It knew it was a grape branch. Appearance, fruit and chemical composition assured it of never being anything but a grape branch. Obviously the very best at that.

So, the branch decided that indulging in a little un-grape-like behavior would hurt nothing. “Once a grape branch, always a grape branch,” it assured itself. It detached itself from the vine. No, it had neither intention nor desire to be anything less than a healthy, beautiful, productive grape branch. It just felt that submitting to the whims of the vine was no longer necessary. After all, its identity could never be changed!

Before long, though, the branch no longer felt strong and vigorous. In fact, it felt utterly drained and limp. Its grapes withered and dropped off. So, did its leaves. Eventually it looked like a stick in the ground. Then it was broken up, and all that remained of it were small particles of various nutrients to be absorbed by other plants.

The other branches, still attached to the vine and plentifully nourished by it, produced a bountiful harvest for the master of the vineyard. They saw that without the vine, their comrade could do nothing. And as they looked at the bare spot of earth a scant foot away from the vine, they realized again that to continue as grape branches they needed to continue being attached to the grapevine. (Mark Roth, “Jesus, the true vine,” Christian Light Publications, May 16, 1999, [anabaptists.org](http://anabaptists.org).)

Stay close to Christ. Get your daily nourishment from Christ. Depend on Christ. That is what Jesus is telling us in this story.

Jesus also mentions pruning. In the vineyard, it is an important activity to produce quality grapes. Pruning allows the plant to produce abundant, quality fruit that gets crushed to make the wine many of us enjoy.

Another illustration about pruning. For those who grow flowers, you know the importance of deadheading – pinching off spent flowers produced by the plant. By pinching off these flowers that have finished blooming, the plant produces more flowers for all to enjoy. It may seem counter intuitive to trim off the blossoms, but if you don't, the plant will stop flowering.

Pruning to our ears may sound painful. But consider that without pruning, like the grape vine, we will not produce quality fruit for God.

In Jesus' day grape vines were not grown on trellises like they are today. They were grown on the ground. The vinedresser, the one who trimmed the vines, picked up the vines, lifted them up off the ground to 'clean' the vine, pruning off the dead branches and excess growth. When Jesus mentions that the disciples are cleansed by the word he had spoken to them, he meant that the disciples had received Jesus' instructions through his teaching. Jesus, the vinedresser, had given them all that was necessary to stay close to him and to be fruitful. His words would help them remain connected to Jesus' love and the nourishment that flows from the vine to the branches.

As I mentioned, without pruning we don't produce quality fruit for the Christ. How do we, like the disciples, stay close to the 'word,' stay close to the nourishment that flows from Christ? One way we can do that is to be pruned by studying the Bible, God's word. We can read the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection and stay focused on what's important for bearing the fruit of Jesus' grace and love. When we focus on God's word, we can cut out all those branches or temptations that don't produce fruit, those sins that can choke out growth. God uses the scriptures to point out to us those areas of our lives that we may think attractive but are not, for they stand in the way of bearing fruit, of sharing God's unconditional love with others. The disciples heard the word directly from Jesus and were pruned and cleaned by it. When we read the Bible and follow its instruction we are pruned and cleaned by it.

Just a couple of more points about fruit. We don't make the fruit. We bear the fruit. It's God's job to make the fruit that we bear. In the self-centered, individualistic world we live in we tend to think we can do it by ourselves. That's not what Jesus is saying here. We can do nothing apart from him.

What does it mean to bear fruit? Examples: feeding the poor, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and, of course, sharing the Gospel with others so they can know God's love for them. There are many ways to bear fruit but be sure that what you do is motivated

by Jesus' love for you and others. Make sure that you are abiding in Jesus as he abides in you.

Note also that in a vineyard each branch is not independent of the other. The branches depend on each other to produce quality fruit. The leaves of one branch shade the grapes from the harsh summer sun that may burn them. Together, the branches produce larger, higher quality fruit. You are not the only person connected to Jesus. Working together produces more and better fruit.

Finally, what is it that Jesus wants us to do? Jesus wants us to bear fruit. Some churches focus on church membership growth not fruit growth. Some churches get tied up with rules and maintenance of the building and miss their purpose – to bear fruit. Let's keep our mission to bear fruit in mind as we make decisions in our church.

How many of you have seen the 2004 film *Sideways*? If you remember the story line, two middle-aged men who take a vacation in Santa Barbara, California wine country. There, the failed writer/high-school English teacher Miles Raymond meets a waitress named Maya, who is intrigued by him:

**Maya:** You know, can I ask you a personal question, Miles?

**Miles:** Sure.

**Maya:** Why are you so into Pinot?

**Miles:** Uh, I don't know, I don't know. Um, it's a hard grape to grow, as you know. Right? Pinot needs constant care and attention. You know? And, and only the most patient and nurturing of growers can do it, really. Only somebody who really takes the time to understand Pinot's potential can then coax it into its fullest expression. Then, I mean, oh its flavors, they're just the most haunting and brilliant and thrilling and subtle.

I use this illustration to point out how God works. Sometimes we don't want to produce fruit. But we have patient and nurturing growers, God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit, who take care of us. They know how to coax out of us our fullest express of their love for humanity. And if we allow them to tend us, to prune us, to clean us, we will product 'brilliant, thrilling, subtle fruit.'

One last thought. You are never too old to bear fruit for Jesus. In the world of wine grapes, it's the old vines that are prized for the quality fruit they produce. You may be older, but you have the experience and faith that younger folks haven't had time to accumulate. That faith and experience enables you to bear quality fruit that God uses to make fine fruit – brilliant, thrilling, subtle.

May God bless your every effort as you abide in the vine and bear fruit.