

I Am the Vine, You Are the Branches

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit.

Well, every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes so that it will bear even more fruit or be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.

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 am the vine, you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit. Apart from me, you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers.

[1 : 08] Such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you.

This is to my Father's glory that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.

If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

My command is this, love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command.

I no longer call you servants because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.

[2 : 09] 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.

This is my command, love each other. If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own.

As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember what I told you, a servant is not greater than his master.

If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know, for they do not know the one who sent me.

This is the gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ. In Christ's church. There we go. That's it. We're on. You may be wondering why I'm so happy today, and I appreciate you wondering that.

[3 : 14] It's 28 days to my sabbatical. That's why. And I don't know if you understand how demanding and exhausting it can be to work one day a week.

But, you know, the old definition of a pastor is six days invisible, one day incomprehensible. But, no, I'm super excited to have this four-month period starting April 25th to August 25th, where none of you text me, email me, or call me.

But actually where I just take a long nap, and I'm praying God's going to fill up my reservoir, give me time with my wife and my kids, and bring me back with some fresh energy and fresh vision for a new season ahead.

So, you want to know the other reason why I'm so happy this morning? Again, I appreciate it. It's March Madness. And I woke up Thursday morning. My brother sent me a text.

He said, hey, check your email and have fun tonight. And he sent me two tickets to the Chase Center for a little pre-sabbatical joy on Thursday. My son Scott and I got to go, checked him out of school.

[4 : 25] We saw Gonzaga, Arkansas. And then we saw Duke beat Texas Tech, which was the main event. And, of course, as you all were following last night, Duke beat Arkansas, which means that Duke is now in the final four.

And this is Coach K's last season. And it's very, very exciting to me. And I know some of you are like, I didn't come to church for this. And I don't apologize. I don't apologize.

But if you do want to talk college basketball, I'm your guy at the coffee hour. Would love to share more about that with you. Okay.

I will preach a sermon, actually. We are in the Gospel of John. And we're looking at the farewell discourse, chapters 14 through 16 in John's Gospel. And this is a real treasure of the church. Because these are Jesus' last equipping words, his last commissioning charge to his disciples, who we imagine in this moment are tearful and frightened.

[5 : 24] Because he's told them, I'm going away on Good Friday on my cross. I'm going to come back to you on Easter Sunday in my resurrection. Then I'm going to go away again in my ascension into heaven.

And then I'm going to come back to you again through the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. And you, my disciples, are to remain in the world to do my work. And that's going to be hard for you because this world is going to be hostile to you.

And it's going to give you a rough time. Jesus says, the world that hates me, persecutes me, and crucifies me is going to do the same to my disciples. And so he explains to them, to this group of less than a dozen Christians, that you are going to go take my word to this hostile world throughout the Roman Empire without me physically present, and you're going to conquer it in my name.

Now, how many of you, if you're sitting in this circle of 11 people, would feel just a little bit intimidated in this moment? And that's why Jesus spells out the equipment that he's giving his disciples for this mission that he's giving them.

He's teaching them in this systematic, circular way the deepest truths about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In fact, he talks about the Father in chapter 14, the Son in chapter 15, the Holy Spirit in chapter 16, and then he prays in chapter 17 his main concerns for this apostolic, Christ-centered church and her mission.

[6 : 53] And what he's doing in this farewell discourse is teaching them how to carry out, and teaching us how to carry out our divine world mission. After Jesus initially wrenching departure from this world, Jesus is saying, how are you going to be related to this resurrected and ascended Lord?

How are you going to carry out your mission for him and through him, whom you cannot see anymore? And Jesus says, the way you're going to do that is because I'm going to give you a closer relationship with the Father, chapter 14.

A closer relationship with me, the Son, chapter 15. A closer relationship with the Holy Spirit, chapter 16. And a closer relationship with one another as the church in your mission to the world, chapter 17.

That's where we're at in John's Gospel, this farewell discourse. And I want to dive into chapter 15 today and suggest that if Jesus is the vine, then his branches will flow with his sap and grow with his fruit.

That's the word for us today, that if Jesus is the vine, then his branches will flow with his sap and grow with his fruit. Let me start with this idea of Jesus being the vine.

[8 : 09] In verse 1, he says, I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. And then in verse 5, he says, I am the vine, you are the branches. And you may think, well, that's a pretty cool self-description.

You know, it's earthy, it's organic, it's viticultural. We like this guy, he'd fit really well in Northern California, Napa, Sonoma culture. But, you know, there's more to these words than perhaps we know.

Jesus, in this Gospel, gives seven I am claims. He says, I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world. I am the gate for the sheep. I am the good shepherd.

I am the resurrection, the life. And I am the way, the truth, and the life. And now we come to his seventh final climactic claim that I am the true vine. And I think he saves the best for last, really. It may be his most profound, shocking, and provocative claim. Why is that? Well, any time Jesus is saying, I am, he's taking God's name that he revealed at the burning bush to Moses.

[9 : 10] I am who I am. I am the world's true Lord. I am the God of Israel. And we've explored that in previous sermons. We won't cover that ground again. But when Jesus says, I am the true vine, we should know that there was a brief period in Israel where they minted their coins stamped with the image of a vine.

And why did they do that? Because this is the most pervasive symbol for Israel. The prophet Hosea calls Israel a luxuriant vine.

The prophet Jeremiah calls Israel a choice vine. The prophet Ezekiel calls Israel a fruitful vine full of branches. And Isaiah, the prophet says that Israel is the vineyard of the Lord.

The Psalms talk about, Psalm 80 talks about how the Lord brought Israel out of Egypt and planted her like a vine in the promised land. Where he cared for and cherished this vine, where this vine grew and where it spread.

But over time, somehow this vine became a rotten vine. And it produced wild grapes. And that was a tragedy because this was to be a verdant vine planted at the crossroads of the world to bear the fruit of love.

[10 : 28] Where all the nations of the world could come and drink the wine of God's justice and God's compassion. Where they could come and be intoxicated with God's righteousness and his peace.

And they could just be filled up with the goodness and the glory of God. But when you read the prophets, God is like this gardener who takes very little joy in this vine.

Because the vine has grown inward on itself. This vine has produced wild and sour grapes. It's become a degenerate and barren vine that's fit for the acts and fit for the fire.

And if you read the Old Testament and you follow the history of God's people, you know that that vineyard of the Lord was ravaged by Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome.

And that's kind of the background you need to know for what Jesus means when he says, I am the true vine. Because when he says, I am the true vine, he's saying, I am the authentic Israel in person.

[11 : 29] I am what God's people were always meant to be. In fact, I came to live the life that every human being was meant to live. I've come to establish love. I've come to show you what God's compassion and justice, what his righteousness and peace is all about.

I've come to bring about what the creator has always intended for us. That the nations would come now and they would drink the wine that flows from me.

And that in me they would become intoxicated with the goodness and the glory of God. That's the ancient biblical context for Jesus' claim.

But think about our modern contemporary context. What does the vine and the vineyard and fine wine represent today? Anybody here like wine?

Grand Cru, Champagne, Cote d'Aron, Bordeaux, Burgundy. What are the Cabernets and Chardonnays? The Rieslings and Syrahs, the Ports and the Madeiras.

[12 : 34] What do these, what does the wine and the vine symbolize? It symbolizes the good life. It symbolizes, the vine shows us the joining together of agriculture and high culture.

And is itself a symbol of civilization, of life, of fertility and abundance, of prosperity and elegance, of joy and feasting.

Right? A really good wine is the ultimate distillation of time and place. Its color, its aroma, its taste is a poetic expression of nature and history coming together.

And Jesus says, I am the true vine. I am the good life. I am the abundant life of God himself.

And if that's true, then Jesus is the object of all of our longing and desire. Jesus is what we've been looking for all our life long.

[13 : 42] That wherever we've tasted beauty, wherever we've tasted joy, wherever we've tasted goodness and transcendence, these have been gifts flowing from Jesus himself, the true vine, the source of life, the core of reality, the heart of the matter.

Who can claim that? Jesus in this claim, he's either a megalomaniac or he's the real deal. Jesus is either a lunatic or he's the most sane person who's ever lived.

Jesus, we have to decide. He's either a madman or he's a genius. And our response to him is either to crown him or to kill him. It's to worship him or to crucify him.

And he's left us really no middle ground. Jesus is either of ultimate importance or he's of no importance whatsoever. Right? The one thing he cannot be to us is marginally important.

He hasn't let that option open to us when he says, I am the true vine. I am the good life. All goodness in life flows from me.

[14:57] I don't know where you stand with that, but that's the claim before us. And if that's true, if Jesus is the vine, the vine, then his branches will flow with his sap.

If Jesus is the vine, then his branches will flow with his sap. You guys with me? All right. He says, I am the vine and you are the branches.

And the vine is this structure that draws up the water, the sugars, the salts that come from the rain and the sun and the soil. And Jesus says, I'm drawing all these things up and I want to pump into you my sap, my energy, my power and vitality and life and love.

I want to pump these things into you. Now, my personal horticultural experience, as you can imagine, is quite limited. I have read Golden Gate Gardening and I have an old pair of pruners from Hida Tool down on San Pablo Avenue, which means I know enough to be quite dangerous.

But what I do know is that some stuff is dead and some stuff is living. And that the dead stuff you're supposed to cut off and the living stuff you're supposed to cut back. And that's what Jesus says.

[16:12] I'm the true vine and my father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that does not bear fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.

Jesus says there's two kind of disciples. There's dead and fruitless disciples and there's living and fruitful disciples. And the fruitless disciples are connected to me externally, formally, structurally.

But the problem is they don't have any of my sap, my energy, my life and power and vitality and love flowing in them. They're just dead wood. And Jesus isn't, he's not talking about the pagan world out there.

He's talking about nominal Christian disciples. People who are connected to the community of disciples. But they're not connected to Christ himself.

Jesus says there's fruitless disciples. But then there's those who are fruitful disciples. And they're not merely connected to me externally, formally, structurally.

[17:14] But they're related to me organically. They're related to me internally. And dynamically. And personally. And intimately. There's a union between the vine and the branch where I am locked into you.

And you are locked into me. And there's this mutual indwelling where you can't really tell where the vine stops and where the branch begins. There's no closer relationship than this.

And Jesus says the secret of having my sap flowing into you is twofold. It's all about pruning and remaining. It's all about pruning and remaining.

If you want to have my sap in you, well, what in the world Jesus is pruning? Jesus says, well, God the Father, he's the gardener. He's the vine dresser. And he cuts off and he cuts back.

Verse 6. He says, 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.

[18:16] And that's basically Jesus quoting the prophet Ezekiel chapter 15. Warning nominal fruitless disciples not to be that. He says these kind of hard things so that we won't go there.

But he says, even the fruitful, even fruitful disciples will experience the sharp knife of the gardener. And if you've ever watched pruning or done any pruning, you know it's drastic, right?

The branch has to be cut back without reserve so that all that's non-essential gets removed from that branch. And after it's done, it looks just basically like this mutilated, naked thing that's there just to survive the cold, harsh winter.

And at first glance, you look at it, you're like, well, gardener, this is really hurtful. This is really actually kind of wasteful. What are you doing? But a good gardener knows.

Come harvest time, you're going to be glad. Because there's going to be good fruit, and therefore there's going to be good wine. And Jesus is telling us that through pain, through frustration, through the sharp knife of this gardener cutting back my ambitions, cutting back my pride, cutting back my self-reliance, that even the sharp knife of this gardener coming into my life and removing things that are good things but not the best things because they're diverting the sap away from where it really needs to go.

[19 : 50] That's the Father pruning us. And ironically, this diminishment, this severance, this reduction, brings about a more substantive, qualitative, lasting fruit in us.

Now, I'm not sure about you, but for me, this metaphor of pruning goes a long way to explain the last two years of my life. Amen? And I think it actually goes a long way to explain the last two years of our church's life, to be frank.

We've experienced a great deal of pruning, which I hope will be for more fruitfulness, better fruit, more lasting fruit, real fruit. I've been reading Psalm 119 during Lent.

It's the longest of the psalms. And I came across these words. It says, the psalmist says, Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I obey your word.

It was good for me to be afflicted, so that I might learn your decrees. I know, Lord, that your laws are righteous, and that in faithfulness you have afflicted me.

[21 : 02] In faithfulness you have pruned me. Jesus says that the way to have my sap flowing in you is twofold. It's through pruning, and it's through remaining.

Well, what in the world is remaining? Jesus uses that word 11 times here. What does it mean? He says in verse 4, Remain in me, and I will 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 am the vine. You are the branches. If anyone remains in me, he will bear much fruit. Apart from me, you can do nothing.

When Jesus says that, he's saying, Be a branch that makes your home with me. Be a branch that's united to me. Be a branch that lives in and receives all of my sap and energy and power and vitality and life and love that I have to give you.

And what's the first step of remaining? It's verse 9. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. Realize that you're already loved.

[22 : 10] Realize that I've already made the first move toward you. I've already taken initiative with you so that whatever movement you are making toward me by faith, I've already made that movement toward you by grace.

I love you. Now remain in my love. And what is his love? He says in verse 12, My command is this, love each other as I have loved you.

Greater love has no one than this to lay down one's life for one's friends. The highest form of love is sacrificial self-giving.

And Jesus, when he says this, he's pointing to what he's going to do tomorrow. It's Thursday night. Tomorrow is Good Friday. And he says, I'm about to accomplish in my death on the cross the supreme act of love.

I'm going to show the world the greatest thing that love can do. I'm going to express to all people the unceasing, outpouring love shared eternally by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

[23 : 14] And you're going to know it because I'm going to die for all the sons of Adam. I'm going to die for all the daughters of Eve. I'm going to lay down my life for all of those lifeless branches that bear no fruit.

For all those tangled branches that bear sour grapes. I, the living and fruitful vine, the only vine that's truly pleasing to the gardener.

I'm going to be willingly cut in the deepest way imaginable. I'm going to have the axe laid at my roots on the cross. And after I'm cut down, I'm going to lay lifeless and barren, cut off in that tomb. And then you'll know what love really is. Jesus is telling us that you've never had a friend like me. You've never known love like this.

And Jesus is saying, please, I'm begging you, remain in my love. Draw your vitality from this never-ending source of my sacrificial, self-giving love.

[24 : 22] And then Jesus, he gets super practical and he tells us how to do it, how to remain. He says in verse 7, if you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you.

The essentials of remaining in me, says Jesus, are scripture and prayer. My words to you, that's scripture. And your askings of me, that's prayer.

And it's as basic as breathing. Jesus is saying, I want you to inhale. In the scriptures, I talk to you and you listen to me. And then you exhale.

In prayer, you talk to me and I listen to you. Inhale. Let my words dwell in you and among you richly. Exhale.

Then let whatever I've stirred up in your heart through my word come out to me in prayer. It's that basic. It's as basic as breathing.

[25 : 26] This daily discipline that none of us are ever even thinking about. It should be like that for us. A predictable pattern. Something we're doing all the time. Remaining in me.

My words in you. Your askings of me. And we do that not just by ourselves. We do that when we gather together here on Sundays.

We do that in our midweek community groups. But these are the essential means that Jesus has given us to remain in him. To have his sap flowing in us.

And if you neglect to breathe, you're going to die. But Jesus says, if you breathe, if you're diligent to inhale and exhale, you're going to live.

You're going to abide in me regularly and consistently. If Jesus is the vine, then his branches will flow with his sap and they'll also grow with his fruit.

[26 : 28] Will not only flow with his sap, but will also grow with his fruit. And this is where I want to end. Where he says in verse 8, this is to my father's glory that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

And when Jesus talks about bearing fruit, he's not so much talking about quantity as he is quality. Right? Good wine comes from quality grapes. And the fruit he's talking about here is the fruit of Christlikeness.

The fruit of being conformed to the image of Christ. The fruit of having the character and competency of Christ in me. The righteousness of Christ.

And that's what discipleship is all about. It's about becoming like Christ. Discipleship is becoming who Jesus would be if he were me. The apostle Paul, when he says in Galatians 5, he talks about the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

He's talking about the fruit of Jesus' life growing in me. And what is that fruit? It's love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

[27 : 40] And I don't have time to go through all those. And you're like, okay, good. But I do want to talk about joy and love, the first two he mentions. Jesus uses the word joy seven times in this farewell discourse.

It's the night before his violent crucifixion. And he wants to teach his disciples about joy. What does that tell us about Jesus? He's full of joy.

He's the most joyful person that's ever walked planet Earth. He says, I'm telling you these things so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

He tells us in chapter 16, verse 22, he says, Now is your time of grief in my cross. But when you see me again on the day of resurrection, you will rejoice and no one will take away your joy.

Your resurrection joy. Jesus is full of divine joy. It's what enables him to rejoice even in the suffering of his cross.

[28 : 44] And it's what enables us to rejoice in our own sufferings, in our own crosses. When the Apostle Paul writes to the Roman Christians in chapter 14 of his great letter, the epistle to the Romans, he says, The kingdom of God means righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

That's what it's all about. It's about the joy of the Holy Spirit. And then he prays in Romans 15 that God would fill the Roman church, the Roman Christians, that he would fill them with all joy.

And the question for us today is, do people see and do people taste the fruit of Jesus' joy in us? Because that's what the Holy Spirit wants to grow, the fruit of Jesus' joy in us.

But he not only wants to grow the fruit of Jesus' joy, he wants to grow the fruit of Jesus' love. My command is this in verse 12. Love one another as I have loved you.

Now just as we close, look around at the people he's talking about. Love one another as I have loved you. And some of you are like, love that guy?

[29 : 54] Geez, love her? Jesus is saying to us, I love them so much that I died for them. I gave myself completely body and soul for those people on my cross.

And I laid myself down in sacrificial, self-giving love. Yes, for her. And yes, for him. And so what I want you to do is to love them the way that I've loved them.

I want you to love them the way that I've loved you. Now I'm giving you this little bookmark that says love one another. And if you lost the bookmark I gave you on John 3.16, well here's your replacement.

These are the mutuality commands in the New Testament that give us clear, concise guidelines for Christian behavior in Christ's church. And what I appreciate about these is that they show us how to translate love from this vague sentiment into concrete action.

Right? If we were to do these things, they would mitigate our tensions. They would mollify our differences so that we, instead of being marked by suspicion and conflict and division, the church would model to the world what trust and harmony and unity are supposed to look like.

[31 : 15] I've gotten those four categories from this great book by Gerald Sitzer called Love One Another, Becoming the Church Jesus Longs For. And I commend this to your reading. If you don't have time to read it, I'm happy to share my abbreviated notes with you.

And then there's a little translation below that of 1 Corinthians 13, which I understand as a picture of the loving character of Jesus himself.

But that's our question today. Do people see and taste the fruit of Jesus' love, particularly his love for his disciples, his love for his church in you?

Is that fruit readily manifest in you? And here's my final challenge. I want you to think about one person at Christchurch who needs the fruit of Jesus' love through you.

And I'm not talking about your bestie because that person's easy to love. I'm talking about one person at Christchurch who needs the fruit of Jesus' love through you. And maybe that's the person that you do not yet know, but you're going to introduce yourself to today at our coffee hour.

[32 : 27] Maybe it's the person you do not know very well, but you're going to invite them to Sunday lunch today or this week. Or maybe it's the person you know all too well and you just find them terribly difficult to love, and you're going to pray this week, Lord, how do you want me to love them the way that you loved me?

And who knows? Maybe you might give them a ride to the airport. Maybe you might help them move or feed them meals or watch their kids or give them money or visit them when they're sick or give them some words of encouragement.

But Jesus says, I am the vine and you are the branches. And when he says that, he's calling us to embody and to imitate his dynamic presence in the world and to bear the fruit of his love so that people can drink the wine of his joy.

And friends, we can't even think about loving the world unless we first love Christ's church. And that's why he says in John 13, By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.

Not generically, but the particular people sitting around you and the specific ways that they need to be loved by Christ through you.

[33 : 55] May God enable us to do this. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen.