

I AM the Vine
Sixth in a Lenten Series on the "I AM's" in the Gospel of John
April 4, 2009
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Isaiah 5: 1 – 7

Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning a vineyard. My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. It was dug and cleared it of stones, and planted with choice vines; a watchtower was built in the midst of it, and a wine vat was hewed out in it; it was expected to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. ³And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. ⁴What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? ⁵And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. ⁶I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. ⁷For the vineyard of God is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are God's pleasant planting; God expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!

John 15: 1 – 11

"I am the true vine, and my Abba is the vine grower who cuts off every branch in me that doesn't bear fruit and prunes the fruitful ones to increase their yield. You've been pruned already, thanks to the word that I have spoken to you.

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just 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. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

Those who do not abide in me are like withered, rejected branches, to be picked up and thrown on the fire and burned.

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Abba will be glorified if you bear much fruit and thus prove to be my disciples.

As my Abba 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 live on in Abba God's love and have kept God's commandments. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

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I AM the vine. You are the branches. God is the vine grower. Once again Jesus identifies himself with a symbol common to his contemporaries. Vineyard imagery abounds in Hebrew scriptures.

Throughout the salvation story, the vine is used as a symbol for the people of God. God plants a vineyard expecting fruit bearing branches and again and again, God's people violate the covenant, fail to live in justice and righteousness and produce only wild grapes or even worse, barren branches that have no value in God's eyes. This morning's reading from Isaiah is a case in point of the useless vine, one that disappointed God.

And so, as in the other symbols and images and metaphors that we have examined this Lent in the Gospel of John, God sends Jesus, God's best self, to reveal once and for all the true bread, the true light, the true door/gate, the true shepherd, and today, the true vine.

"I am the vine" declares Jesus. Finally God has pulled out all the stops and sent God's self to earth. Every other attempt has met with failure. Now God's people can become the branches attached to Jesus and there will be life, abundant life, for all who believe.

Notice the number of times that the word "abide" appears in this morning's Gospel lesson. We are to "abide" in him, Jesus instructs us. He continues, "Just 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. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing."

You'll note that the grapes and the grapevines on our altar visual are artificial. They are not the real thing. I learned my lesson many years ago about the importance of "abiding." It was on a World Communion Sunday that I unwittingly demonstrated the truth about "abiding" to the congregation in Andover. On the day before World Communion Sunday, I picked armloads of grapevines laden with clusters of Concord grapes from a parishioner's yard. It was October and the grapes were magnificent. I spent hours arranging the altar visual that fall evening. It was a designer's delight.

Obviously, I hadn't paid attention to the message of the scripture lesson nor understood its teaching that "a branch apart from the vine can do nothing" for when I entered the sanctuary on Sunday morning, eager to feast my eyes on the altar visual, there to my shock and dismay were withered, brown leaves that had crumbled into brown nothings and without their weight and fullness, the heaviness of the grape clusters had pulled and dismantled the entire arrangement of branches.

"Abide in me" advises Jesus, for without me you can do nothing. Do you find that to be true for you? Are you rooted in Jesus? Do you count on him to give you the courage to live life fully? abundantly? in his name? And how are we doing as a congregation? Are we, too, rooted in Jesus? Do our choices and decisions reflect the values and vision that Jesus has for this world?

Which part of our Capital Campaign do you think pleases Jesus the most? As you know, I do heartily support the need for this campaign. If we want to continue to worship in this beautiful

sanctuary and meet in the church facility and invite the community to use our space for their programs, then we must invest in making capital improvements to this 50 year old church building; and if we want to continue to be United Methodists, a denomination that depends on offering pastors a home to live in, then we must invest in housing for future pastors. To all this, surely Jesus would nod his approval. But what would most delight him would be our intentions to give 10% of our Capital Campaign monies away to causes and programs beyond our own doors. This tithe, this share of our campaign, will support programs and ministries that give life to others. Most specifically, how excited would Jesus be about our seeding a fund for micro loans to those who are economically impoverished. Such loans would enable the poorest of poor to set up a small business or open a small store in front of their home or plant a crop that would provide a source of income for the whole family. You know the old adage: Give a man a fish and he will eat for the day. Teach a man to fish and he will eat for a lifetime. Over time, these micro loans get paid back by the borrower, and so the project will be able to continue to invest locally and globally for years to come. That's the kind of fruit bearing that Jesus expects when we, as a church, abide faithfully in him.

Those who abide in Jesus will bear much fruit because apart from him we can do nothing.

The other major implication in the gospel reading is that we all need to be pruned. Ouch! Pruning hurts. Last week Loretta spoke about light and life and told us how her plants came to life when she opened the curtains and let in the light. Now, Loretta, I have the ominous task of warning you that as your plants flourish, some day they will need to be pruned. Cut back. Can you imagine it? Yet it will be the pruning that will shape them as well as help them grow more profusely.

Years ago, on a mission trip to Jamaica, I learned that after a banana tree has produced its crop, the entire tree is cut back in order for new growth and new bananas.

Oh, yes! There has to be a Good Friday before Easter can happen.

But pruning, no matter where or how it happens is painful. Trimming away our excesses, sometimes what we might even consider our essentials, is not easy. Jesus, however, asks his followers to be ready for a good pruning.

Peter left behind the family fishing business. Mary Magdalene gave away her wealth. Paul renounced his privileged place.

How have you been pruned? And how has that pruning led to a greater yield of fruit. Love is how we measure the yield. To bear fruit is to act in love. "Love each other" Jesus commands us again and again. Love your family. Love your neighbor, especially the ones that disgust you. And hardest of all, learn to love even your enemy. Yes, the fruit of the vine is love and compassion and especially hard won justice for those who are often considered the most unlovable.

Millard Fuller comes to mind when I think of pruning. Founder of *Habitat for Humanity*, Fuller died very suddenly and unexpectedly a couple of months ago at the age of 74. Millard Fuller has been called "God's contractor" because of his commitment to provide housing for the poor. More

than a million people now live in Habitat homes in over 100 different countries. But all of this didn't happen without a severe pruning.

Years ago, Millard and Linda Fuller were in the prime of their life but also found themselves in a time of personal crisis. Their marriage was an unhealthy and an unhappy one. Oh, they had plenty of money at the time. In fact they were worth millions and their wealth provided them with all the things that anyone could want. But they were very unhappy. And so they retreated to Koinonia Farm in Georgia and entered a period of prayer, confession and soul-searching. They decided to start life anew on Christian principles. They pruned away at their material possessions. Gone were the speedboat, the lakeside cabin, the fancy cars. They rooted themselves in Jesus' way of living. They began to abide in him and sure enough, they bore much fruit.

Abiding. Pruning. Fruit bearing.

The vine. The vinegrower. The branches.

Grounded and rooted in love we who are loved are taught to love one another.

And forget not Jesus words that are spoken at the end of this discourse on the vine. "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."

May it be so! Amen and Amen.