

The I Ams of Jesus: The True Vine

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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John 15:1-8

If you want a full understanding of John 15, you have to know some of the Old Testament imagery behind Jesus' words. Of course, Jesus' words still have value even if you don't know the imagery, but if you want to hear the full message, you should read Isaiah 5. Isaiah 5 is the song of the vineyard, and in the song of the vineyard, the prophet compares God's people Israel to a vineyard that the Lord has planted in this world. The song of the vineyard begins with the prophet singing: *"I will sing a song for the one I love, a song about his vineyard."* He goes on to sing about how God clears the land of stones, how he digs a well and builds a winepress and plants the whole vineyard in the land He has prepared. But the vineyard is unfruitful. *"The Lord of the vineyard looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit (5:2) He looked for justice, but saw bloodshed (5:7)."* The Lord of the Vineyard is angry. *"I tell you what I am going to do with my vineyard: It will be destroyed... I will make it a wasteland neither pruned, nor cultivated!"* The symbolism is pretty obvious. God planted his people in the Promised Land, a good land that he had made ready for them. But they were unfruitful. They've failed to do justice, they've failed to follow his commands, and they've failed to be a blessing to the nations. They don't want to be rooted in God's ways. They don't want to be tied down to his commands. They don't want someone else telling them what to do. They want to follow their bliss. They want the freedom to choose their own path! They reject these limits on their self-expression.

That was Israel's attitude in the time of Isaiah, but it's not just an Israel thing. People have had this attitude throughout history and it's an attitude that lives inside each of us. There is something in us that doesn't want to be ruled. There's something in us that doesn't want any restrictions on our choices and our freedoms. There's something inside us all that chafes when someone says, "You must do this; you may not do that." There's something in us that wants to be lord of our own life.

Another way of saying this: There's something in us that doesn't want to be a vine. We don't want to be a planted thing. We don't want to be a thing with roots. We want to be a rolling stone, a rambling man. We want to be as free, free as a bird. That's our preferred image for freedom, right? And yet a bird is the opposite of a rooted thing. No one says I want to be free as a tree, or free as a vine. The only problem is that we are rooted creatures. We are made to be planted in communities. We are made to be planted in networks of relationships. We depend on the labor and kindness of parents and teachers and mentors and friends, and most of all we completely depend on the grace and love of our God. We are rooted creatures, and when we try to live without roots we may feel free and happy for a moment, but our rootlessness will not end well. Without roots we will be like cut flowers. Go into your garden and cut some flowers and put them in a vase and they will look great for a while, they can even give off the short-term impression that they don't need roots! You take them away from all the messiness of the leaves and branches, you take them away from the messiness of the roots and the soil, and you put them in a vase and they look so beautiful! "See! They are meant to be free!" But that soon changes. Without roots, they wither and fade.

When Jesus speaks the words of John 15, he is speaking to tired plants. He's speaking to people who've tried to go their own way a few too many times, and they're tired and they're

weak and they're worn. He's speaking to people who've tried to live a cut flower existence, and now they are starting to wilt. Jesus stands up and he speaks these words to all weary, poorly rooted people.

Read John 15:1-11. Do you hear how this "I am" saying is a word of good news to tired, wilting people? Do you hear how this is good news for people who tried to live a cut flower existence? Do you hear how this is good news for a whole world full of people longing for water from a deeper well to sustain them? Jesus is saying, "However you may have failed in the past, I am the true vine. You can find hope and fruitfulness in me." I would like to share with you two ways in which this vine gives hope to tired and broken people.

First, the vine gives us a strength we do not have by ourselves. Did you notice that while it draws on the vineyard imagery of Isaiah, the vine imagery changes slightly? In Isaiah, God's people are the vines. We are the ones planted in the ground. But now in John 15, Jesus is the vine. Jesus is the one planted in the ground. He's the one with the roots. Our roots aren't planted in the ground anymore, now we are grafted in him. "*I am the vine, you are the branches.*" Now we get our nourishment through him. When we are in him, our stability doesn't depend on our roots anymore; it's His roots that keep us stable and nurtured.

In the Ripon area of California they grow a lot of Almonds. They don't call them 'almonds' though; they call them 'ammonds,' which is clearly wrong, but don't tell them I said that because they are very sensitive on that point. Almond trees have mediocre roots. They don't thrive in the California soil. They are not hardy. If you try to grow an almond tree using its own rootstock, it will not be fruitful. It will fail. Repeatedly. So the farmers there have figured out a brilliant solution: they have grafted almond trees into the rootstock of a kind of peach tree. Peach trees have a hardy root that does well in that California climate. Once it is grafted into the peach stock, the almond tree becomes fruitful. On its own the almond tree can't make it. When it's in the peach rootstock it can be abundant.

In John 15 Jesus promises us fruitfulness in exactly the same way. On our own we are not strong. We don't stay rooted. We fail. Repeatedly. But when we are grafted into him everything changes because his roots are eternally deep and eternally strong. When we abide in him we draw from a river that never runs dry – the stream of living water that flows from the throne of God. Eternal life flows from God's throne up through the roots of the vine and into the small branch of our life. In him we have a strength and fruitfulness that we couldn't have by ourselves.

So Jesus is telling us that we have strength and fruitfulness when we abide in him. He's also trying to show us that when you are part of this vine, it is beautiful and joyful. It is possible to read this as an "or else" sort of passage. It's possible to read this as a finger wagging threat kind of passage. You better abide in the vine because if you don't, it's the burning pile for you! And there is no question that there is plenty of warning here. Jesus says, if you try to live on your own strength you will shrivel. That warning is helpful and it is true. But the central word here is not a threat, the central word here is an offer of joy. Jesus is holding up life in the vine and saying, "When you are in me you can be fruitful!" "And that fruitfulness is joy for you and glory to my Father in heaven!" "I've told you this so that my joy might be in you and that your joy might be complete." In this passage, Jesus does not offer fear and threat; he offers joy and love and fruitfulness.

Hearing this offer, it's worth asking: what's at the center of my faith? Is it fear? Is it a sense of duty? Is my faith just a kind of thoughtless momentum? Or is my faith rooted in the joy in the beauty of God.

Faith works better when it starts with joy and love and beauty. Bishop Robert Barron tells a story about growing up in Detroit and how, as a young kid, he LOVED baseball. He was a baseball fanatic. He couldn't get enough of playing ball and he couldn't get enough of watching

his beloved Detroit Tigers. His favorite player was Denny McClain, the last pitcher to win 30 games in a season. Where did his love for baseball come from? When he was 7 years old his dad took him to a Detroit Tigers game. It was 1967 and he and his dad drove through the industrial streets of Detroit to Tiger Stadium. They parked in the hot gray expanse of the parking lot and they walked through the parking lot into the dark stadium entrance. They pushed their way through the crowds and up the stairs to the field. Bishop Barron says that he will never forget the moment when he came out of the dark stair and saw the field there spread out in front of him in the sunlight. There was the perfectly manicured green of the outfield, bathed in sunshine. There was the flawless brown diamond of the infield. And spread out across the field were the Tigers players, warming up in their vivid white home uniforms. With a flick of an arm the outfielders zipped the ball from player to player with magnificent ease. With a smooth and easy rhythm, the shortstop, absorbed the ground balls and flipped them to first base. It was all so beautiful. The beauty of the game overwhelmed him, and guess what little Robert Barron want to do the next summer? He wanted to play baseball. And he wanted to watch baseball. And all he wanted to talk about was baseball.

You can try to nag someone into playing ball. “Son when I was your age I played ball, why don’t you play little league. C’mon! Try it. It’s fun! You’ll meet people!” But on its own, nagging and urging will never make a baseball player. You can teach someone all the rules and facts of baseball. Three strikes and you’re out. Four balls and it’s a walk. This is where the pitcher stands and this is the batter’s box. This is a single. This is a home run. That will make them knowledgeable, but it won’t make them a baseball player. But if your son or daughter falls in love with the beauty of the game: The smell of the cut grass, the feel of a thrown ball smacking the leather of your glove, the pleasing sound that a bat makes when the ball hits the sweet spot. If a person finds himself overwhelmed by the beauty of these things, you will have someone who follows the game the rest of his life.

*“I have told you this so that my joy might be in you,
and so that your joy might be complete.”*

At its very center, our faith is a thing of beauty. At its very center the salvation that we have in the True Vine is beautiful. That’s what John is trying to tell us right from the beginning of his gospel. *“In him was life and that life was the light of all people!” “We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father full of grace and truth.”* Glory! Light! Life! Grace! Truth! Look at this Savior! Look at this salvation! It is beautiful. Behold the true vine! The Father planted it deep on a hill outside Jerusalem. Jesus allowed himself to be planted on that tree so that we could be grafted into him and live. The grafting wasn’t easy. He had to be cut to make room for the graft. He was cut in his hands and his feet and his side so that we could become part of him. And now, because of him a frail branch like me is brought into the life of the living God. The grace and love of the Holy Spirit flows up through him and into us and we become eternal. It’s beautiful. With my imperfect words I hold it up for you this morning so that you can see it, so that you can love it, so that you can abide in it, and so that your joy might be complete.

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