

John 15:1-8 (New International Version)

1 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. 2 He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. 3 You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. 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.

5 "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. 6 If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. 7 If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. 8 This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

**This is the Word of God and it can be trusted!
Thanks be to God.**

The last verses of chapter 14 give us an account of Jesus comforting the Disciples concerning His soon to be departure from them. Jesus states "You heard me say, 'I am going away and I am coming back to you.' If you loved me, you would be glad that I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. I have told you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe. . . ." Prior to these words, Jesus has instructed the Disciples in the way of Holy Communion and have instructed them to continue this practice in remembrance of Him. It is in this same tradition that we ourselves partake of the Holy Elements each Sunday; "This is my body. . . this is my blood. . . ." We do so to remember all that Jesus spoke, did and suffered during His ministry so that we may have life through a renewed relationship with our Creator.

Afterwards; Jesus instructs them to leave with him and they go to the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus will pray the great prayer in which he prays for Himself, His Disciples and all believers ending with, "not My will, but Yours be done." Later He is arrested by the mob led by Judas. In the midst of these

events, Jesus takes the time to continue to teach His Disciples; his current teaching makes up the words of chapter 15 in route to the garden and is the location of our scripture reading today.

John's Gospel describes how the eternal Son of God gave himself a string of metaphorical names: "I am the Bread of Life; the light of the world, the door of the sheep, the good Shepherd, the resurrection and the life, the way the truth and the life and here in chapter 15, Jesus is pictured for us as the True Vine. Before we continue this morning, let us pray that God will direct us in the understanding of His teaching of the *Vine and the Branches*.

Eternal God our Heavenly Father,

We are grateful for the proclamation of your word. We are grateful for the way you reveal yourself to us in the Scriptures and we are grateful that you are not confined to this written word. We are grateful that you are revealed in many diverse ways and through your beloved people throughout history. Open our hearts and minds to the proclamation of this word, that we are the branches while you are the True Vine. Help us today to hear your voice and only your voice, that we might learn more of you and, by the power of your Holy Spirit, become more like our Lord Jesus.

We offer this prayer in Jesus strong name, Amen.

Allow yourselves for a moment to picture Jesus and these men going through the darkened streets of the city and then passing beyond the walls into the surrounding countryside. As Jesus walked with his Disciples, perhaps He reached out and took a vine in His hands and used it to teach an object lesson to His men. His desire was to teach them about the most vital relationship they were to have in their lives, the one they had with Jesus and His Father.

Jesus has been with these men for quite sometime and they have been taught many things by Jesus. In addition, they have witnessed and performed many miracles in the name of their God. So, why did Jesus give them this teaching now? The answer is simple: **They needed it!** These men have just been informed that Jesus is going away, but that His work is going to continue, and that it is to continue through them and their lives, (John 14:12). If they were to carry on the work of the Lord, then they needed to know how to produce that kind of fruit in their lives and needed to be fully aware of the source of that production.

This morning, we are more than 2,000 years removed from that night, but the work of the Lord still marches forth. God is still working through the followers of Jesus Christ to accomplish His work and His will in the world today. Many of us may sit here and wonder how we are supposed to do the work of the Lord and how we can produce that kind of fruit in our own lives. Well, the answer is found in these verses. Because this passage is all about becoming a genuine Disciple and about how to bear fruit for the glory of the Lord.

A few years ago Chris and I had the opportunity to visit Germany in the Springtime. It was mid to late March, maybe early April and his sister's husband was stationed there. We thought this would be a great time to experience Europe and to see the beauty of the German hillside. Well, in our own ignorance we failed to realize that Germany is still very much in their winter season during this time and the vineyards lie cold and seemingly lifeless during this time. As we traveled there were hundreds of acres of vines on the hills around us, however each vine looked like a stump with two or three very short dead

looking branches. Now imagine if those vine branches could think and have feelings, how would they experience the process of producing grapes ?

As the farmer begins to prepare the vineyards for summer, he says to the little branches, this summer you are going to be producing nine big bunches of grapes. As they lie there cold and withered, the poor little branches think to themselves, "There is no way I am going to be able to do all that, I haven't got it in me. I couldn't even produce a leaf if I tried." How many times have we felt the same way when faced with God's instruction and longing for us. In telling the parable Jesus tells his Disciples in verse 8, "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and so be my disciples" and goes on to instruct them in verse 16 that they are to go forth and bear fruit, fruit that will last. All the gardener expected from the vine branch in the parable were grapes. But the our heavenly Father takes delight in each of us producing the ninefold fruit that Paul lists for us in his letter to the Galatians. "The fruit of the Spirit", Paul writes, ". . . is love,

joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control"

Now it is true that with a bit of effort we may be able to learn a bit of patience or self-control. Some people are naturally kinder or more generous than others. But they are unlikely to produce the rich sweet fruit that God has in mind. Anything we produce by our own effort quickly turns to self-righteousness, which has a sour taste for others and even more so for our heavenly Farmer.

As stated earlier, if the Disciples were to carry on the work of the Lord, then they needed to be instructed in the way to produce that kind of fruit in their lives. We are to recognize in the parable today, that there is no way we can produce by self-effort the kind of fruit that we are designed to bring forth in our lives. Jesus said. "Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me . . . because apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:4-5).

Certainly we can choose to do some things by our own strength. Learning to garden or drive a car can be achieved with a bit of time and effort. Learning to refer to our partners with gender neutral pronouns so as to avoid confrontation with coworkers and colleagues can be a bit harder. Raising kids is very much harder, but many parents manage it quite well. There are hundreds of other useful things we can achieve by our own will power. But producing the beautiful fruit of the Spirit is totally impossible for us. It can only be done by trusting and abiding in the one who is the True Vine, our Lord and Savior Christ Jesus.

Jesus said, "Abide in me as I abide in you . . . those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit" (John 15:4-5). What does abiding mean? How can we both be in the vine and the vine in us? In the book *The Training of the Twelve*, the author Alexander Bruce explains that, The branch abides in the vine structurally; and the vine abides in the branch through its sap, vitally. Both of these abidings are necessary to fruit-bearing. Unless the branch be organically connected with the stem, the sap which goes to make fruit cannot pass into it. On the other

hand, although the branch be organically connected with the stem, if the sap of the stem does not move into it, it will remain as fruitless as if it were broken off and lying on the ground. (p. 409)

All this is clear; but when we ask what do the two abidings signify in reference to the mystic vine, the answer is not quite so easy. Sticking as closely as we can to the natural analogy, however, we may then describe the reference to an outwardly versus inwardly relationship with Christ. In other words, "Abide in me" means, Hold and profess the truth I have spoken to you, and give yourselves out as my witnesses. The second abiding, ". . . and I in him," signifies the indwelling of the Spirit of Jesus in the hearts of those who believe. While abiding in His doctrine, that is the truth of His Word, the Disciples must also have His Spirit abiding in them. We must not only hold to the truth of God's Word, but we must be filled with the Spirit of truth.

Many people are only outwardly connected with Jesus the Son of God. They have been baptized, they can say the creed, sing hymns, listen to sermons, work for the church, take

communion. What they miss is the inner life of the Spirit. In this case the Holy Spirit corresponds to the sap coming up into those dead looking vine branches, and giving them the nutrients needed to grow, and produce fruit.

Apart from that inner life, the branch remains lifeless. Sometimes you can see a dead branch on a vine when the other branches are growing leaves and little grapes. Perhaps an insect has blocked the flow of sap, and it is only a matter of time before the branch turns brittle and is broken off. As Jesus said, "Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withered; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned" (15:6).

In failing to complement the outward relationship with the inward relationship, many Christians get discouraged. They try very hard to produce love and joy and peace, and other fruit of the Spirit, and after a few years they find they are making no real progress. They feel lifeless, and church is a bore. So they become frustrated, get miffed and quit. They have had an outward connection with Jesus the Son of God, but they haven't learned

the secret of letting the Spirit abide in them. For those who desire more than just the outward and seek a stronger more connected relationship with their creator, the day comes when they begin to feel the inrush of the Holy Spirit of God, and they know they can relax and let the fruit come in due course.

When the Spirit begins to work within us, we find that the Word of God becomes a joy and becomes a very effective, meaningful part of our lives. Jesus tells us in verse 7 that "if you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you". The reason such prayer is answered is not because we have been promised everything that we ourselves desire, but rather because the longing is first given to us by the Spirit, and so is given in accordance to the will of God. When a branch feels the sap beginning to push out a new shoot, or leaf, or bunch of grapes, that desire to grow is given for the one purpose of bearing effective fruit. On the other hand the prayers that we think up according to our own agenda are very unlikely to be what God has in mind.

Many Christians have had the great experience of being filled with the Holy Spirit. They find themselves in an exciting time of growth and renewed energy and begin to believe that their plans are God's plans. Then suddenly the Vine Dresser comes and brutally prunes away the growth that is not needed. "Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit" (John 15:2). When this happens it is easy to get upset and discouraged. Maybe we begin to blame those around us for interfering and getting in the way. Maybe we think to ourselves, "I was doing so well, and now most of what I was excited about has been taken away from me. What is to become of my seven year plan?" How we respond to these times of pruning says much about our ministries and does much to determine the outcome of the process. Just the right amount of pruning can increase our harvest, while too much can destroy an entire vineyard.

The teaching of the parable of the Vine and the Branches is especially meaningful and beautiful for those who love the Lord. For such individuals, the teaching is indicative of the deep,

personal relationship between them and their Lord. For effective fruit bearing we need our structural faith connection with Jesus the Son of God, we need the vitality of inner life given to us by the Holy Spirit coming in to do in us what we could never do by our own will power, and we need to welcome the painful pruning of the Father. On the one hand our Father is as tender as the most loving of parents. He cares about our effectiveness in producing an abundance of good fruit and will not let us dissipate our energy in all directions. So when the pruning knife cuts us back, rather than fuss and cry, and try to regain what we have lost, as we have seen so many in our lives strive to do, we should relax in the Father's care.

The parable of the Vine and the branches gives us the assurance that however weak and frail we are, God the Trinity can and will produce beautiful fruit in our lives. It is not a question of will power or any kind of self effort. All that is needed is confident abiding, and the Father, the Son, and the Spirit will do the rest. That does not make us passive and lazy. For a vine branch producing big fat bunches of grapes is very hard work.

People who relax and let the Spirit do his work in them are wonderfully energized. As Paul said "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you to will and to work for his good pleasure (Philippians 2:12-13).

As we close this morning, let us take a moment to reflect. To reflect on what God has done through you and to reflect on what God may be wanting to do through you. As you reflect this morning ask yourself, "What is my part in letting God work through me?" Maybe there is someone you have lost contact with that God wants you to call or write a letter to. Maybe God wants you to reach out to a coworker who is in need of a friend or an encouraging word. Maybe God has brought you to New Day Worship Center with a skill, talent or gift that only you can contribute to this ministry. We are all branches and so I ask you to reflect today on what fruit you will bear. "The fruit of the Spirit", Paul writes, ". . . is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." I want you to focus on one thing that you could see God doing through you.

I want you to take a moment to imagine and feel what that one thing would be. Allow yourself a moment to picture God doing this through you.

Father God,

As we sit here before you this morning, we seek your guidance and wisdom. We ask that you breathe your Holy Spirit upon our spirit enabling us to picture ourselves doing your work. We ask Lord for a clear picture and understanding of your will and work in our lives and within this community of faith.

In Christ name we pray, Amen.