

Vines and Vinegrowers<sup>1</sup>  
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 First Presbyterian Church, New Bern  
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**John 15:1-8**

<sup>1</sup>"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. <sup>2</sup>He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. <sup>3</sup>You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. <sup>7</sup>If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup>My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

Before our daughter Sarah Allan went to college, I remember trying to think of all of the things I wanted her to know. I told her how to do laundry, which was silly-- she'd been doing her own laundry for years. We talked about finances. What to do when she had disagreements with her roommate. Who to call when she had plumbing issues or problems with a class. I wanted her to be prepared for all that was ahead.

Jesus is trying to get the disciples ready to leave home, too. Or at least to live without him. Our text for today is smack in the middle of Jesus' farewell discourse.

He's already told them:

"Do not let your hearts be troubled." "I will come again and will take you to myself."

And he's getting ready to tell them:

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." "I have said these things to you to keep you from stumbling."

And in between, our text for today, this lovely metaphor in which God is the vine and we are the branches. A reminder that we are, together,<sup>2</sup> invited not to visit God but to abide with God. To stay

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<sup>1</sup> Not quoted, but used in research:

Bruggemann, Newsome, et al. Texts for Preaching Year B. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993. Pgs. 314-316.

Leander E. Keck, New Testament Editor, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, "John" by Gail R. O'Day, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), page 754-761

Sloyan, Gerard, "John," *Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988) page 188-189.

<sup>2</sup> Pointed out by D. Mark Davis in <https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2015/04/remaining-requiring-receiving.html> And Diana Butler Bass in her Sunday Musings for 4.28.24

with God. To be in God's care, wrapped in God's love.<sup>3</sup>

It's lovely and comforting, it's almost as if we could forget about all of the things Jesus says here about pruning. About branches that do not produce fruit being removed. Or burned.

We cannot, of course, forget or ignore them. Being in relationship means hearing the hard truths as well as the celebrations. Jesus clearly thought that this was important. To know that failure to grow in faith, in love, in discipleship would be handled by God.

Pruning, of course, is something that gardeners know needs to happen in many plants for it to truly grow, to thrive. It is not limiting growth, but encouraging it. Letting go those things that do not serve God's kingdom.

But what about the removing. The burning. The throwing away. Is that what happens when vines don't bear fruit quickly?

There are, of course, vines that do produce quickly. Strawberries pumpkins and others bear fruit the first year they are planted.

Sara Miles, the author of the book Take This Bread,<sup>4</sup> grew up as an atheist. Her grandparents had been mission workers and it left her parents disillusioned with faith. With the church. And so their gospel was not going to worship on Sundays it was literature and music, good food and deep conversations. Sara didn't question this life, not even as an adult. It seemed like it was enough. Until one day in her 40s when Sarah found herself walking down the street in her hometown of San Francisco and decided to go into St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church instead of walking by like she'd done every other day. She thought she just wanted to see what the building was like and then she stayed because she wanted to know what happened in this building. She stayed for worship. Just a regular, garden-variety worship service. She didn't know what to think or even what it meant when she heard the words "Jesus invites everyone to his table," but people got up and made their way forward to the table, so she joined them at the table. The communion table. A table with dishes and a pottery goblet. And then, when someone put a piece of fresh bread into her hands with the words "the body of Christ," and then handed her the goblet with the words "the Cup of Salvation," it happened. As Sara describes it, "something outrageous and terrifying happened. Jesus happened to me."

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But there is something else interesting in the passage — it isn't just about one person. The "you" is plural. More like "y'all." *Abide in me as I abide in y'all.* Jesus was sharing with his disciples — a *group* of his closest followers. He wasn't pointing to particular individuals as abodes as if some of them were single family dwellings in the suburbs.

<sup>3</sup> Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, General Editor, *The New Interpreter's Bible Dictionary*, Volume 1, "Abide," by Marianne Blickenstaff (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), page 9

<sup>4</sup> Sara Miles, Take This Bread: The Spiritual Memoir of a twenty-first-century Christian, New York: Ballantine, 2007, pages 8-9.

It was an immediate transformation. From atheism to belief. In that moment at that table Sara Miles became a disciple of Jesus Christ and very soon afterward started a food pantry at the very same church. She had been fed at Christ's table, and she didn't want anyone to be hungry. Her church now feeds over 400 families every week. Feeds them with food boxes that are often stacked on the same communion table where she came to understand that she was not an individual vine, but a part of God's true vine Jesus Christ. It happened in an instant. Fruit appearing in the first year.

But sometimes, doesn't it take a bit longer? Grapes and kiwis and others can take 3 – 5 years, and another five before they actually mature. Is the transformation any less significant if it is not instantaneous?

In 2009, Eve Birch found herself without a place to live. She'd been a librarian when her life fell apart. She thought she had it all and was completely self sufficient. Until she wasn't. She had a truck and \$56. She scouted outside her small town until she found a small shack in a hollow that the owner agreed to rent her for \$50. It had plywood on the windows, glass on the floor, and had been abandoned. She moved in and got to work.

There were, of course, curious neighbors, and at first she thought they were just a nuisance. But pretty soon, she realized that they had things to teach her. Maybe most significantly, how be a neighbor. They dropped off blankets and candles, tools and canned venison. And after a while they didn't just drop things off, they stuck around to chat. They taught her the value of having sharp knives and how to store food in the creek so it wouldn't spoil. And having an extra plate for company. It didn't happen overnight. Bit by bit, Eve was transformed. The things she'd thought were most important – her self-reliance and work ethic, her possessions and her savings, she began to see them as worthless commodities. She saw that her most valuable asset was her neighbors and what they could build together.

After a few years, Eve moved back into town, but not back into a house of her own. She found a way to buy a house large enough that she could share. She could take people in who were down on their luck or who needed a little help. It's called "My Friend's House." For people whose transformation might take a little time, more than a few moments, but was none the less significant or important.<sup>5</sup>

What happens when the transformation takes a little time, if the fruit is not quite ready. Is God going to remove those branches? And what about branches that are dead, but are waiting to be resurrected?

It turns out, the text has quite a bit of flexibility here. The word "remove" here can mean something else entirely. It can mean to lift up. To elevate. Which is what vinegrowers do with grape vines to help them grow. They don't cut them down at the first sign of trouble. They trellis them.

And then, for vines that are continuing to struggle, they can be trellised, supported, encouraged to

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2009/04/12/102961694/the-art-of-being-a-neighbor>

grow and thrive.<sup>6</sup> To take away the parts that are no longer serving and cultivating new growth.

God isn't just there for the harvest, but for the growth, putting in the work well in advance of the fruit that can be seen.<sup>7</sup>

This past week, the church was hit with several rounds of spear fishing scams where many of you received emails or text from accounts pretending to be me and asking if you could help with someone confidentially, or have an email conversation, or send money to help stranded mission workers in Colorado, or buy gift cards for someone in the hospital.

In some ways, it derailed so much work that was on my list. We tried to get the word out as quickly as possible through social media and our email list. To remind everyone to pay attention to the email address sending the email or the phone number sending the text. It wasn't our email address. It wasn't my cell phone number. That we would never, and I mean never, ask you to send gift cards. We would never, and I mean never, ask you to do something confidentially or say that you could not call the church to speak with us.

But still you called. Or emailed. Or texted. And given the nature of the scam, it wasn't the kind of thing we wanted to wait before replying. So I text back as quickly as I could. I emailed back with as much information as I could. I spoke with you on the phone.

I made really bad jokes about how if I needed something urgent I was more likely to tell you that I needed an IPA, stat. Of that you should urgently send cute puppy videos.

But as we finally got to Friday and the scam didn't send another round of emails and texts, I began to realize something. Yes, the scammers were good. But what had people calling or emailing even after

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<sup>6</sup> <https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2015/04/remaining-requiring-receiving.html>

Another challenge is with the word ἀίρει, which I have preliminarily translated as removes. In the comment section below, you will find a conversation that I had with Bruce MacKay about the meaning of this word, specifically whether we should go with the primary translation of "to raise up, to elevate" to see if Jesus is suggesting that the non-fruit bearing plant is trellised instead of removed. I asked a friend who works with grape growers in Sonoma Valley and while he is hesitant to suggest how to translated Greek texts, he thought the idea might be suggestive. Pruning and trellising seem much more positive as ways to respond to defunct branches than cutting off.

3. Verse 6 below will speak of branches that have not remained on the vine, which are thrown out because they are dried up. I think I've always assumed John was being circular and repeating himself (as I often feel about John's presentation of Jesus' words), but maybe v.3 is about the weak, fruitless branch that is hanging on; while v.6 is about the branch that has left the vine. I'm only at the "maybe" stage for this thought.

<sup>7</sup> "Grape vine fruitfulness is actually set the season before. That means you want sun into the canopy so that fruitful buds are formed. Managing the canopy through pruning and trellising are tools to increase fruitfulness the coming season. And of course that must continue annually to maintain fruitful vines. Weather at bud differentiation also plays an important role. Cold and cloudy weather when bud differentiation is occurring can reduce fruitfulness as well. Typically today at least, each cane (each bud creates a cane) will have 2 clusters. If 0 is it a blank shoot. Sometimes you get 1 cluster or 3, again depending on the weather the previous spring.

reading about the scams wasn't fear, it was a desire to help. A desire that did not wait and wanting to make 110% sure that wasn't us asking for help. And I'm not sad about that at all. The week wasn't derailed at all. If anything, it was a good pruning to reveal your true nature.

The world is a hard place right now. Wars and famine. College campuses in turmoil and trials on round the clock coverage. A looming election that has a knot in just about everyone's stomach. And for goodness sakes, if you want to have any hope for humanity, I hope you are staying away from the comments sections.

But what I'm struck with this week is how connected to the vine you are. Even though it was a scam, when asked, you didn't just feel like you were respected to respond, you wanted to respond.

One of the things we talk about frequently around here is the importance of the Holy No. Saying no to that which does not have your name on it. That "no" is a complete sentence when it comes to being asked to work or help or volunteer in a way you do not feel called to do.

But the other part of that idea, the one that I don't always mention, that I should discuss more, is that saying "no" isn't the end. We pray you will say no so that you can say "yes" to the thing that God IS actually calling you to do.

And God has something for you. There is someplace. Somewhere. Something. That most certainly has your name on it. Are you already holding it in your hands? Is it bearing fruit? Or are you searching? Or growing? Or doing the work of tending so that you are ready when the growth does come?

This week there aren't stranded mission workers in Colorado who need our help. But there is a mission project in Haiti that is hanging on by its fingernails.

There's a rehab center in New Bern that closed recently, what will arrive to stand in its place to help those who want to be rid of the power of drugs in their lives?

There are meals to prepare at RCS and animals that need walking at the shelter. And someone who is willing to ask the bigger questions of why we have so many people who are hungry and work for solutions that mean RCS won't have so much work to do.

There's an elderly gentleman who would love to know that the church family is thinking about him and there are still houses damaged by Florence that are waiting to be repaired.

There's a family who just got home with their baby from the ICU. I bet a casserole would be a grace for them.

There are projects here at the church waiting for stewards to step up and make them possible. The Foundation is working to make sure we can continue to make headway long into the future.

And someone most certainly needs to know that they are beautiful and loved and someone is praying for them. And that person might just be yourself.

God is within and without and through and above and in it all with us. To encourage the vine when it feels weak. Trellising it when our spirits lag. Nurturing it in faith with the words of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit.

There's something else that's unique about this passage that should be mentioned. One of the things that the gospel of John is known for is its "I am" passages. It's the only gospel that has them. Jesus said "I am the bread of life." "I am the light of the world" "I am the gate." "I am the good shepherd."

But here, as Jesus prepares the disciples for his departure, and only here, "I am" is followed by "You are."

"I am the vine, you are the branches."<sup>8</sup>

Not you will be or you can be or you were. You are.

So let us be them. Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-of-easter-2/commentary-on-john-151-8-6>

The "I AM" declarations are unique to John's Gospel and occur in two forms: the "I AM" statements with a predicate nominative, and the absolute "I AM" statements by which Jesus reveals his true identity as God incarnated (4:26; 6:20; 8:24, 28, 58; 13:19; 18:5, 7). Given the location of this last predicate nominative "I AM" statement in the Farewell Discourse, all of the previous predicate nominative "I AM" statements stand behind "I AM the vine" (6:35, 51; 8:12; 9:5; 10:7, 9, 11, 14; 11:25–26; 14:6; 15:1, 5)...

The metaphor communicates mutual dependence, provision, union, and sustenance and recalls the relationship between Jesus and the Father established in the prologue to the Gospel (1:18). One of the primary claims of the Fourth Gospel is to assure believers that in their believing, they share in the relationship between Jesus and the Father now and always.

This is made clear when Jesus says to the disciples, "You are the branches." This is the only predicate nominative "I AM" with a "YOU ARE." After hearing Jesus' distressing words just prior to this—"Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid" (14:27); "I am going to the Father" (14:28); "I will no longer talk much with you" (14:30)—the disciples need to hear reassuring words. Jesus' statement is not "You have been" or "You will be," but "You are the branches," and this present-tense promise is the peace needed for troubled hearts.