

The Connection

Have you ever been to a vineyard? Many citizens of the twenty-first century live their lives in cities or towns or suburbs, and have never seen a vineyard. It's in rural areas that vineyards are usually found. Often they're on rolling hillsides, in temperate climates with cool nights and plentiful sunshine. So that they can produce luscious, juicy, sweet, abundant fruit.

If you *have* visited a vineyard, you probably remember a setting of serenity and stillness, of beauty and peace, a place where vines and branches lie dreaming under an impossibly blue sky. A place that looks very much the way a vineyard would have looked thousands of years ago.

A place that looks very much the way a vineyard would have looked in biblical times. To people who walked the earth in those days, vineyards were a common part of the landscape. Songs and stories of vineyards abound throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. And Jesus features vineyards in several of his parables.

To help his hearers grasp his message, Jesus uses familiar images that were an everyday part of first-century life. Like

bread. Like a shepherd. Like a gate. Like a vine. Today, in the Fourth Gospel, we hear Jesus say: *I AM the true vine*. We hear another of his I AM sayings.

Now you and I understand that in these I AM sayings, Jesus is expressing his oneness, his unity with the One who sent him, the Holy One whose name is I AM. And we know that whatever comes *after* the I AM tells us something about the ways of God in Christ Jesus.

Who tells us: *I AM the vine, you are the branches*. You, as a branch, grow out of the vine. You, as a branch, are connected to the vine.

But what does this connection mean in your life and mine? During our time together, let's reflect on this connection between vine and branches.

It's a connection that's vital to the life of the branches. Earlier in this month of April, we celebrated the resurrection in worship and then at a marvelous breakfast in the [Bethel] fellowship hall. As a flowering sign of Easter and springtime for that gathering, a branch of blooming dogwood was severed from the tree, and placed in the room in a spot where its loveliness could be seen by all. And it was! But after the breakfast was over

and the branch was taken down, the person who was carrying it away noticed that its blossoms were already wilting, and lamented that the branch would not long survive.

It's the same with you and me. As branches, we *need* our connection to the Vine. We need the nurture and sustenance of the Vine. Not for a season only, but for always. If a branch is fallen, if a branch is separated from the vine, there is pain. Not only for the branch, but for the Vine.

Is Jesus not hurt when he loses one of his own? Does he not yearn to stay connected to his own? Surely, broken connection grieves the heart of God, who is love. God, who is the Vinegrower.

Now, as any viticulturist knows, in order for there to be an abundant yield, the branches have to be tended. According to Jesus, the Vinegrower tends every fertile branch. The Greek word for this branch-tending connotes a process of cutting and cleansing.

In this Sunday's reading, Jesus is speaking to his followers: to the twelve and to you and me. To the church that treasures these Easter season texts. Jesus has good news for you today: the

process of your cleansing has already begun! *You have already been cleansed*, he says, *by the word that I have spoken to you.*

This cleansing happens through the activity of God's word. Which like a sharp sword cuts away every part of us that blocks our connection to the Vine. That gets in the way of our connection to Jesus Christ. That impedes the movement of his life flowing into ours.

The cutting and cleansing by the Vinegrower is done with gentleness and grace. But it's not a process we have control over. And that may be difficult for us. Don't we like to be in charge? Our culture prizes personal self-sufficiency. And encourages us to believe that we can do it all and that we don't need any help, thank you very much!

But the Vinegrower says *no, that's not the way it works*. The Vinegrower takes our craving for control and cuts it away. The Vinegrower keeps on snipping and clipping until we *get it*, until we understand our complete and utter dependence, as branches, on our connection with the Vine. The snipping and clipping continues until—finally—we realize that we are totally helpless and hopeless apart from relationship with Jesus Christ. Apart from connection to the Vine.

If you look closely at a grapevine, you'll see that each branch is connected to the vine. You'll see that the branches encircle it. You'll see that so intricately are the branches intertwined that you can't tell where one ends and the next one begins. That's how it is with the branches. And that's how it is with us.

All of us. Male and female. Young and young-at-heart. Laity and clergy. Affluent and needy. There's no hierarchy in our connection. There's no greatest or least. We're all branches connected to the one Vine.

Jesus knows that anyone familiar with a vine would understand that its branches can't be distinguished, one from another. But doesn't this sound more than a little countercultural to our ears? We live amid a society that values individuality, a society that attempts to train us, from birth on, to value all the rights and gifts of the individual. And the strengths of the individual.

But the only true strength comes from the branch's connection to the Vine. As, every week, I prepare for the awesome privilege of standing before you behind this sacred desk, I'm humbled by the awareness that apart from Christ, I can

do nothing. That if I rely solely on my own efforts, no acceptable words will come from my mouth.

But, as Paul affirms, you—and I—can do *all things* through him who strengthens us. Through connection to the Vine that binds us branches together. United together, our strength is far greater than the sum of our strengths as isolated individuals. Our strength comes not from inside ourselves, but from the Vine. Strength from the Vine courses into all of us branches that intertwine with one another.

For we are connected, not only with the Vine, but with one another! Today we hear the psalmist singing of this connection. We are a family—and we celebrate unity with all the families of the earth who worship and serve the one God. This connectedness with one another was of great significance to John Wesley; so important that he referred to the people called Methodists as a *Connexion*. Today, you and I are connected to other United Methodist Christians in our Fairfield Circuit, in our Columbia District, in our South Carolina Annual Conference, in our Southeastern Jurisdiction, and around the world.

This connection helps us to live in peaceable harmony with one another. In *Ministry Matters*, it was noted that “...conflict

takes advantage of the [disconnection] between us. The further apart we are, the easier conflict can find room to cause havoc. Our culture has grown accustomed to smearing our neighbor with computer keys, but it is much more difficult to slander the person sharing a cup of coffee with us.”

That observation fills me with gratitude for the blessing of our being deeply connected to one another in this community of faith. In this church. Even when our geographical journeys take us in different directions, we will always be a part of one another. For we are people who live in relationship with one another.

And we are people who live in connected relationship to the Vine; a relationship in which the branch takes on the character of the Vine. In relationship with Jesus, you grow to be more like him. That’s the reality that grounds his promise that whatever you ask will be done for you. His wish becomes your wish. His intention becomes your intention. His desire becomes your desire. Because whatever you pray for is prayed in accordance with his perfect will, it will be given. You’re connected to the Vine.

Thanks be to God! Because without this connection, you can’t do what you as a branch have been created to do. This connection to the Vine equips you and empowers you and enables

you to bear fruit. The one gift of your connection to the Vine is bearing fruit. The one calling of your connection to the Vine is bearing fruit. The one mark of your connection to the Vine is bearing fruit.

This fruit you and I are to bear is acting in love. This fruit you and I are to bear is works of love. This fruit you and I are to bear is living into the commandment Jesus gives every one of his followers: *Love one another as I have loved you.*

It's easy to say, isn't it? It's not so easy to do. Most of us spend a lifetime trying. The church where Bob and I worshiped during the seminary years had as its mission statement: *Learning to love as Jesus loves, and sharing that love with others.*

It's an amazing mission for us who live in connection to the Vine. In this connection—*your* connection—you can and you do and you will bear fruit. Beautiful, luscious, juicy, sweet, abundant fruit! The glory of the loving Vinegrower is the fruit you bear, the fruit of the Vine. The fruit of the One who abides in you. The One in whom you abide, today and tomorrow and forever.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.