

“Growing your Connection to the True Vine” based on John 15:1-17

Delivered on May 2, 2021 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor.

Growing up, I spent a lot of time with my grandmother in her garden. This was no ordinary garden – it was in many ways a small farm in her backyard. She didn’t have much property. Her back yard was about the size of the sanctuary, but about one-third was dedicated to row crops. Then there was a large mulberry tree along the back of her property line, and this tree’s branches leaned into the center of her yard. Along the side of her house were two fences, that both closed off the backyard from the front. This was where she grew beans, peas and grapes. Along another fence, she grew marigolds, sunflowers and Chinese money trees.

These are, of course, the kinds of experiences that helped to shape who I am. I spent time with my grandmother, knowing first she loved me unconditionally, and I demonstrated my love for her by learning from her, loving her and working with her. As I pondered today’s reading, I kept thinking about my grandmother, while also reading a book recommended by a new friend.

In doing this, I began to ponder the depth of John’s writing, and thus, the depth of Jesus’s words in this passage. It’s easy to take this at face value and that’s fine, yet if we follow the references Jesus makes and expand upon his metaphor, I think we will find so much more.

My hope is that together, and I mean together, because I need this message as much as anyone, we can get a better understanding of this passage, and apply it to our lives. My hope is that like I was shaped by my time with grandmother, we can be better shaped by our relationship with Jesus and one another, by resting first in the awareness that we are unconditionally loved and responding to that love with our time and energy.

Now, the first thing I want to point out is that this vine analogy is one of both work and rest. It’s easy to just jump on the language of ‘bearing fruit’ and make it all about works, just as it is easy to see the language about branches being burned, and try to make this about God’s vengeance, rather than God’s love. But the truth is that for the Jewish hearers of Jesus’s message, there may have been an uncomfortable hope in his words. It was uncomfortable because it expanded God’s kingdom, beyond the chosen people of Israel, and yet hopeful, because it meant love and rest, because God was now doing, what Israel never achieved. God was fulfilling their covenant.

You might be asking now, ‘OK, I just heard him read this passage, did I miss something?’ The beauty of John’s writing here is that it’s like poetry in its use of the vine metaphor, and in its allusions to things unsaid in the passage but available to its audience. That is the power of poetry, using tools like these and more, as a way of making a few words pregnant with a lot of meaning. And so, that is what we have in this relatively short passage.

When Jesus says he is the true vine, Jesus and also, the Evangelist John, by how he presents it, appears to be making a reference to Psalm 80, in which God takes a vine cutting, Israel, out of Egypt, then drives out the nations and plants it, where it grows deep roots. The description is of a vine on the ground, shaded by mountains and trees, that stretches out to the sea and to the river, but is bound by walls. We know it is walled because the Psalmist laments that its walls

have broken down, and so all who pass along can just pluck its fruit, and the boar of the forest ravages it, while all other grazing animals eat from it. But even so, there is hope in this.

The Psalmist asks God to care for the vine, calling it, 'the stock that your right hand planted.' And so, the poet goes on to ask for this hand to be upon the one *at* God's right hand, which is a reference to a coming Messiah, the anointed King to restore Israel. This is the one whom God will make strong, after which the Psalmist promises, that the people will never again turn from God, who gives life, but instead call on God's name to be restored, and let God their savior's face shine on them. This is all in a few verses of Psalm 80.

In calling himself the 'True Vine,' Jesus is the embodiment of Israel, its covenant fulfillment. Yet, he is also claiming to be the one at God's right hand, not as a mortal King, but the embodiment of that right hand, that power, because apart from him, Jesus says that we can do nothing, and will fall away to be burned. But connected to him in the vine, we will bear much fruit. But what's more, if the vine is not the nation of Israel, then attachment to the true vine is not by heritage. Jesus says it is by loving one another, following his command to serve, but in knowing your purpose, you are called his beloved, to be his friend.

This is the primary allusion that John, who is steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures, highlights. But it may not be the only allusion that Jesus makes, which John's translation reveals. This is what I love about the depth of the writing in the New Testament in its awareness of Greek and Hebrew culture. There was in Jesus and John's day a strain of Greek thought, or philosophy, that used vine imagery, but its focus was on the pruning, or cleansing of those vines. Indeed, little is known of this, Orphism, except this aspect of its teaching about the pruning and cleansing of the vine. So, this word we translate as 'pruning' is the same root word we use to say cleanse, or to purify. So, it is the same word used here, to prune the branches and assert 'you are clean.' In our faithfulness, we are made clean.

John conveys Jesus's message in a way that would resonate with Jewish and Greek readers. So, now that we have the primary allusions that the first hearers would have known, let us now dwell a little on the metaphor of the vine, and what it means. As I said, the vine metaphor is about bearing fruit, but it is also about rest. When Jesus says, 'remain' or 'abide' in me, in many translations, this is a term for attachment, enduring, clinging, holding fast, but the fruit we bear is not the labor, but the product. The work is not producing the right fruit for God, but remaining connected to God's love, holding fast to faithfulness in who Jesus is as the vine.

We sometimes worry a lot about our works and achievements, the fruit that is produced. But in this metaphor, we should consider that if Jesus is referring to grape vines especially, the means by which they are attached is most important and the fruit is a source of comfort and relaxing, for grapes are both for food and for the making of wine for celebration.

Friends, this is good news because our faithfulness to abide in Christ is not measured by the fruit we produce, but our attachment to him. We do not 'do works' to attach ourselves to Christ, not so. We do them because we're attached and produce fruit, revealing Christ to the world by how we live, living into our covenant calling to reflect him, in a ministry of reconciliation.

But now I want to take this metaphor a little further, considering what we know of grapes. Grapevines, when they are growing wild, have one purpose – to make more grapevines. But if Jesus is the true vine, the purpose of the fruit is not to make new vines. In this metaphor, the vine is what matters most, not the fruit and its seeds, those are for God’s joy and glory. Jesus says that apart from him, we can do nothing. Indeed, if we try to clip ourselves off of the vine to grow roots, and be planted as a new vine, it will not work.

Only our connection to the true vine brings life, and so this is what matters most. I like to think of this image as a Trinitarian one, with the Father as the gardener, putting water and nutrients into the soil, which are like the Holy Spirit, and Jesus is the vine by which those nutrients are given to the branches. The gardener, the water and soil, and the vine, do not need branches, they are enough in and of themselves. But still, all three love the branches that grow off the vine, and the branches and their fruit bring joy and glory to this triune God. This is by no means a complete picture of God, but one way to see God’s fullness here, in this particular metaphor.

So then, the question becomes for us – how do we remain connected to the vine? How do we bear the fruit that brings God so much joy? The answer: A Trellis.

When the vine grows on a trellis, the branches have support and can grow up, but what’s more, when the fruit is kept off of the ground, it ripens, and it is transformed from just a seed that may root next to its parent. Instead, it is a fruit that can be eaten as is or made into wine or jelly. The support structure is not needed by the branches, but it helps the branches to stay connected, lessening the burden of gravity, and allowing for more fruit to grow. As I said earlier, in addition to this passage making me think of my grandmother, whose grape vines grew each year up a cyclone fence about six feet tall.

Likewise, I also finished a book this week that was recommended to me. The book is called, ‘The Common Rule,’ by Justin Whitmel Earley. In it, Earley uses an image of a trellis, or fence, for faith formation. He says that we build our trellis with our habits, the things we do to maintain our connection, and point the fullness of our lives to Christ.

Now, in our modern culture and modern Christianity even, there are a few sayings we hear. One is that *‘I’m spiritual but not religious.’* Another, because people don’t like the word religion any more, is *‘I prefer Jesus over religion.’* Still another, is *‘I don’t need a church, I can worship God anywhere.’* These three statements reject the idea that we need a trellis. As I said, they are right that we can be connected without one. But as Earley points out, there are forces pulling us away, like the many advertisers that seem to know us, better than we know ourselves. They market to us constantly to our smart phones that pull us in, and all the thing we watch, and listen to, and follow, stay connected to, leaving Jesus behind.

It is true that Jesus loves you regardless, but these forces seek to separate you from the vine, tugging at you to pull you from the branch to keep us from loving Jesus. They keep us from living into our calling, and so, we need some help, a lot of it. I know I do. The author proposes four daily ‘keystone’ habits, habits that will change us, and another four weekly habits, all of which can center us on Jesus. He calls it the ‘common rule’ because these individual practices,

they are not meant to be done alone, by individuals, but together, in a community, in common life.

Now, what he proposes is nothing brand new for the church. Still, he gives this rule, or a way of life, a modern twist. Maybe this will seem like nothing to you, but for me, to follow this rule would be a challenge and yet, I think it would do so much for me and my family. His daily habits are to turn your phone completely off for one waking hour each day, to detach from it entirely. Another is to eat at least one meal with another human being and connect with them. Another is to read scripture in the morning before you do anything else, especially before you pick up your phone, and to kneel in prayer in the morning, afternoon and night, to physically engage in prayer.

These are a very modern need for us, as smartphones have changed our culture quickly in the last 12-14 years. I know how hard it can be to set the phone aside and exist without it. The weekly habits also account for the realities we face in our modern culture. So, these include keeping a Sabbath rest day of 24 hours of no housework or career work. Likewise, he recommends a fast for 24 consecutive hours each week, from all food or just one thing. This will help us to connect with the idea of being without, feeling our humanity and solidarity with those who do without. Third, he suggests limiting online and television media consumption to just 4 hours by intentionally choosing or curating what you watch. And last, spend at least one hour in conversation, with a friend, face-to-face, in vulnerability.

Let me tell you that for me, these are more difficult than they may seem. And while, I believe they are worthwhile and I endorse the book, I'm not reading this to you to say these are the rules you must do. But Earley makes a compelling and biblical case for the value of these habits, and I am certain that they will help build a trellis to help you in life, both to remain connected to Jesus and to bear fruit. But the point that I think is essential to the author's plan, is that these kinds of things need community.

And so, remember those sayings I mentioned before. What if we applied them not to Jesus, but to our family relationships. In my marriage, I'm spiritual, not religious, meaning when the spirit moves me, then I engage my spouse. I don't do anything regularly or with intention. How long do you think a husband and wife would remain connected?

The same goes for 'I prefer Jesus over religion,' which sounds like 'I prefer my wife more than commitment.' What do I need to be committed to her for? I'll just stay focused on her, because all this commitment stuff isn't necessary. If I stray, I'll come back. Jesus takes me back. Now, I'm sure there are exceptions, but in general, this doesn't work.

Likewise, the idea that we can be faithful to God while alone, completely misses the fact, that lives are shaped by working together in a loving relationship, like me and my grandmother. We worked side by side and we grew closer in love.

Yes, while Earley presents a great trellis building exercise to do together, the reality is that there is already a trellis built to help us, and that trellis is the church, it is your community of

faith. Friends, while I'm sure it is possible to be connected to Jesus all by yourself, on your own, that sounds like an intense burden, that will either weigh you down, bringing your branches down, or making it impossible to stay off the ground where our fruit only rots.

You have the church where a trellis is already built for you to climb. Now, I admit it is not perfect. There are problems with the trellis. There are things that have holes, things that are broken and more things that need fixing. Yet, when you engage in personal practices like Early describes, you repair and rebuild the church trellis and build it higher by your contributions, your personal attachments that impact you witness to others, and you bear more fruit.

As I said, this is as much preaching to myself as it is to you, because I'm an American. I've been taught the values of the age of Enlightenment, of rugged individualism, that I can just do anything if I work harder and try harder. But we do nothing apart from Christ and we are not the only branches. We are branches in community climbing a trellis of the Church, and the church is not individuals seeking individual salvation for themselves, but a community of individuals seeking salvation for the community and the whole world through reconciliation.

And so, as we look toward increasing the in-person gathering in our worship services, and as we look to a time beyond this COVID-19 pandemic and all its tragedy, please consider your place as a branch among many connected to the vine. Consider how you can be a part of the trellis here at this church again. This is not to create a burden of service, but to offer you friendship with each other and with Jesus.

And in preparation, consider reaching to each other. Perhaps you can pick up copies of this book, 'The Common Rule,' and try the practices together. You can use the devotional that is on the back of the bulletin every week. You can use another resource. Whatever you use, use it to strengthen your faith and love for Jesus, who loved you first, sharing in your life, to die and rise again for you. This is for you and all of us. By this we share in his life, in community, now and forever. Amen.

Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in *bold italics*.

John 15:1-17 (NTE) ‘I am the *true* vine’, said *Jesus*, ‘and my Father is the *gardener*. He *cuts* off every branch of *mine* that doesn’t *bear* fruit; and he *prunes* every branch that *does* bear fruit, so that it can bear more fruit. You are already *clean*. That’s because of the *word* that I’ve *spoken* to you. ‘Remain in me, and I will remain in you! The *branch* can’t bear fruit by itself, but only if it remains in the vine. In the same way, you can’t bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the *vine*, you are the branches. *People* who remain in me, and I in them, are the ones who bear *plenty* of fruit. Without me, you see, you can’t do anything. ‘If people don’t remain in me, they are *thrown* out, like a branch, and they *wither*. People *collect* the branches and put them on the *fire*, and they are *burned*. If you remain in me, and my words *remain* in you, ask for whatever you want, and it will *happen* for you. My Father is *glorified* in this: that you bear plenty of fruit, and so become my *disciples*.’ As the Father loved me,’ *Jesus continued*, ‘so I loved you. Remain in my *love*. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands, and remain in his love. I’ve said these *things* to you so that my *joy* may be in you, and so that your joy may be *full*. ‘This is my *command*: love one another, in the same way that I loved you. No one has a love *greater* than this, to *lay* down your *life* for your *friends*. You are my friends, if you do what I tell you. I’m not calling you “servants” any longer; servants don’t know what their *master* is doing. But I’ve called you “friends”, because I’ve let you know everything I heard from my father. ‘You didn’t choose me. I *chose* you, and I appointed you to go and bear *fruit*, fruit that will last. Then the *Father* will give you whatever you ask in my name. This is my command to you: love one another.