

1 John 4:7-21
John 15:1-8

First Presbyterian Church of Delanco, NJ
5th Sun. in Easter, May 10, 2009

God's Special Vine

At the Presbytery required Early Ministry Institute I attended this past week, the keynote speaker was Dr. Leonard Sweet, author of *The Gospel According to Starbucks*. One of the issues he addresses is the use of images and imagery in our churches. He suggests the person who uses images and imagery the best is Jesus Christ who uses parables, images created through words, in many of His teachings and most of His illustrations. Today's text is a wonderful example.

As Jesus and His disciples prepare to leave the Upper Room and move toward the Garden of Gethsemane before Christ's arrest, John records Christ's comparison of Himself and His followers to a vineyard. The close relationship with Jesus and His disciples cannot be described in exact, theological terms. So, as He has done all through His ministry, Christ uses an image here of a grape vine and its branches to illustrate spiritual truth. His union with these disciples is as alive as the relationship of the vine to its branches.

Jesus is the "true vine." In the Old Testament writings, Israel frequently is spoken of as the vine which Yahweh loves and tends. But repeatedly, their waywardness and corruption make God's people barren and fruitless. Now it is Jesus who is the real vine, the Chosen One from God.

Jesus' Father, our heavenly Father, owns the vineyard and cares for it. His main purpose in growing a vineyard is so it will bear fruit. When branches become dry, lifeless, and bear no fruit, He takes them out to be destroyed. At one time, these branches had beautiful green leaves and seemed to flourish. But then the Source of Life is cut off, and now they are barren and dead. An example is Judas Iscariot who walks with Jesus during His ministry and is plotting the details of Jesus' death while Jesus and the disciples are in the Upper Room. It seems so much of synagogue life in Jesus' time is once the center of faith and then becomes hardened and based on man-made laws through which it becomes dead! Selfish interests, unconfessed sins, careless disregard for the truth, or a bitter, unforgiving spirit blocks the flow of life from the main vine. Gradually, the branch dies; and it is taken away to be burned.

The Vinegrower also prunes or trims those sprouts and leaves which may prevent the branches from bearing fruit in any way. Generally, in August, the little shoots which would take life from the vine are pinched off so the fruit-bearing branches are able to get all the nourishment. We may consider the experiences in our own lives, which we call troubles or problems, the hurts, disappointments, and defeats, as the Father's way of pinching off those excess leaves which seem attractive, but bear no fruit. The Vinegrower calls us to strong discipline and obedience, the arrangement of our priorities, so that our time, talents, and resources are for His use instead of for other interests. The only criteria the Vinegrower uses in pruning branches is, will the branches bear more fruit.

We and the original disciples are not perfect, but they and we are made clean because the unnecessary leaves are cut off. The “word” which Jesus speaks readies us all so we might bear much fruit. Each of us is searched and cleansed, prepared for ministry. Jesus’ small community of disciples is pruned, for one among them is gone. The life and spirit in Jesus’ words confront Judas and judge him. He is gone out.

We become aware that God makes us clean through His Word, that without Him we can do nothing. The fruit the disciples bear is not what they do, but the life of Jesus inside them. It is His character reproduced within them and shared with others in love. This cannot happen without the disciples abiding in Jesus, making his or her home in Jesus, as Jesus makes His home in each disciple. Christ’s life is shared with His disciples as their and our lives are given to Jesus Christ.

Jesus can truly say, “Without Me you can do nothing.” No amount of creative planning, or restless activities, or sponsoring of spiritual events on our own can produce this fruit. This would be similar to trying to tie imitation fruit on living branches. It just does not work.

The context of this passage is important and seeks exploring. First, the discussion about the abiding between Jesus and His disciples is meant for a community engaged in service, a community whose distinctiveness from the world brings out the world’s distrust and hatred. The wonderful imagery of the vine and its branches is especially important in our mission.

A second observation is the historical character of the imagery we want to remember. The Old Testament is full of passages which talk about Israel being God's special vine. We, too, are part of God's special family, His special vine.

This imagery shows our attachment to God and how we are joined together. Jesus' command to the church is for us to remain part of our communal life and for our ministries to be part of social justice so we cannot be pruned and tossed away from Christ. Pruning and trimming can be painful but do have a positive intent which is more fruitfulness. This passage, though, is more directed toward the church as a faith community than toward individuals.

A third observation is that the imagery requires an open-endedness within our congregations. The image of the branches abiding in the vine may helpfully indicate other ideas not specifically mentioned, including being connected, permanency, and vitality.

The fruit resulting from the abiding and the pruning is not limited. Prayer, becoming disciples, and glorifying the Father are also associated with bearing fruit in the passage. But other fruit such as growth, usefulness, and nourishment are possible as well.

A final observation is the interaction between Jesus and His disciples is spoken of as being both a gift and a task. This passage says readers are branches and the Divine Gardener or Vinegrower is at work to make the branches more productive. At the same time, we are called to abide in Christ which encourages a constantly renewed commitment. Our

interdependence and fruitfulness do not occur automatically. The text frightens us a bit by saying the branches which fail to abide are worthless and fit for nothing more than firewood. We wonder if that refers to us. John wants us to realize the possibility of such a thing happening should not paralyze us with fear. Abiding in the Lord is two-sided. Abiding is us as disciples in Christ, and Christ in His disciples. The requirements of being a fruitful disciple are surrounded on every side with grace.

God, through Jesus Christ, is the Vinegrower. We are the branches of here and now. Christ wants us to bear fruit. Christ wants us each to use the opportunities He provides to bear fruit through spiritual growth, using our spiritual and other gifts, and glorifying God the Father. Christ nourishes us through words of Scripture, the Lord's Supper, answering our prayers, and in other ways. Imagine, we are being nourished personally and daily by the Vinegrower. Jesus Christ wants us to know we are constantly being cared for because we abide in Him and He abides in us. May we continually give thanks for Christ's images, His ongoing nourishing of us, and His unconditional love for us. Amen!