

“The Vinedresser’s Tale”
John 15:1-8
A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells

PRAYER: Loving God, you have made a way for us in the world, the way of peace through your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us today to hear your words of life, to hear them afresh, to allow them to be planted in our hearts in such a way that our love for you grows ever stronger. Give us the strength to love as you love, without reservation, and without hesitation. Strengthen us by your Spirit. Grant your servant words that tell of your love. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you this day. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

When I was growing up on Long Island, New York, I lived for a time in the house that used to belong to my grandparents. It was a small white house set on a beautiful wooded lot. In the garden, just outside the back door, there was a garden that had not been tended to for many years. It had become overgrown with English Ivy. If you don’t know what English Ivy is, think about the movies you’ve seen where there’s an old brick mansion, or a university hall, covered in green vines that look like they are consuming the building. That’s what English Ivy looks like. And that’s what it does—it overpowers everything else in the garden.

English Ivy is a tough vine that spreads rapidly. It is really hard to get rid of once it’s established. I remember one year I had to cut back that ivy to try and created some lawn space and, let me tell you, THAT was one of the hardest jobs I ever had to do. Part of the reason for that is that the individual plant vines get all tangled together, roots and all. It’s almost like these plants know our old adage about finding strength in numbers. They live and grow together, their tendrils and shoots weave together in mutual support of each other, in order to spread and thrive...and they did just that in my Long Island garden. They were stronger when they live together.

In today’s lesson from the Gospel of John, Jesus uses the image of another kind of vine—the grapevine. He uses this picture to describe the strength that comes from living together through God. This is imagery that was familiar to people in Jesus’ day. Israel was referred to several time in the Hebrew Bible as a vine. For example:

- Joseph is called “a fruitful vine” in the Book of Genesis (49:22).
 - The Prophet Jeremiah, speaking for God, tells Israel “I planted you as a choice vine, from the purest stock” (Jeremiah 2:21).
 - And in the Psalms, the story of Israel is told as the story of God who “brought a vine out of Egypt;” who cleared ground for it, planted it, and watched as it took deep root to fill the land spreading “its branches to the sea, and its shoots to the River” (Psalm 80:8-11).¹
- The story of the vine Jesus tells draws on these traditions. In Jesus’ telling:

¹ Clinton E. Arnold, Editor, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, John, Acts, Volume 2, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 143-144.

- Jesus is the grapevine, the true vine (the real deal), and God is the vine grower or, better yet, the vinedresser.
- The vinedresser has an important job: to train and prune the vines so that they can produce the best fruit possible. This is tedious work requiring patience, dedication, skill, and knowledge about the plants.
- This is a level of commitment we might also call love—love the vinedresser has for the vine and all its branches.

Love is what draws people to Jesus to begin with...and it is love that sustains them but only if they stay connected to the vine, to Jesus. I think that's why Jesus is so adamant that the branches of the vine (his followers) abide (which means living or dwelling) in him. The reasons are obvious:

- Branches only live when they are linked to the vine.
- Cut off the branch, and it will die.
- Followers of Jesus Christ experience the new life that comes from God only if they remain connected to Jesus.
- Cut off this connection and we would suffer a kind of "spiritual asphyxia." God's life in us would wither and die.
- Branches can't live without the vine
- We cannot live the new life in Christ without being connected to Christ.

The vinedresser sees to the health of the branches by carefully eyeing each segment of the vine, spying out the branches that produce no fruit and the branches that hold the most promise of being productive.

- The vinedresser prunes the branches, cutting away the dead or dying pieces.
- The vinedresser also trims away the tiny, new shoots because these threaten the overall health of the branch by growing in too many directions all at once.
- Too many shoots draw off the sap—the lifeblood of the vine—from the branches, making them weak and less able to produce fruit.

Pruning helps in another way: it clears away the clutter that would occur if the vines were left to grow on their own. That's an important insight for our lives, one that most of us should be familiar with.

My family is going through something like this right now. As we get ready to move to a new apartment, we are finding a lot of things that have piled up over the years sitting in our basement. Going through the boxes and stacks of books and clothes and other household items, we're finding we really don't need all this stuff. It's time for us to do some pruning; time to declutter our lives.

This is true for all of us and not just with household goods, but also spiritually. All of us have things that clutter our spiritual lives, things that distract from our relationship with God. These distractions don't come all at once, they usually build up over time. Like an artery that gets clogged over a period of years and needs to be cleaned out, the same is true for us spiritually. We need to get rid of the things that come between us and God, things like:

- Bad habits.
- Unhealthy or unsafe practices.
- Negative attitudes, fears and suspicions.
- Essentially, whatever it is that distracts us or draws us away from God needs to be pruned from our lives.

We will be healthier spiritually both as individuals and as a community of believers when we do this kind of pruning.

And that brings me back to a really important point about the vinedresser, the vine, and the branches. The vine in this story is a symbol of community. It is a picture of God's people living through the strength of the vine, who is Jesus. We cannot live apart from the vine. We thrive only when we are connected to the vine, which—by the way—connects us to one another. We may not think of it in these terms because in Western culture, we are taught to think and act more as individuals than as groups. Now there's nothing wrong with a little individualism; but take it to the extreme and we would wind up thinking only about ourselves and our needs, and not the needs of others. This is counter to the biblical message and the witness of scripture.

- Maybe this helps explain the reason for the unproductive branches in the vinedresser's tale.
- Those branches that don't produce fruit...maybe they are the ones that are self-centered, selfish, the "me-firsters," concerned only about what they can take from the vine and not what they could produce for others if they tried.
- Maybe these are the ones, the people, who fail to live in mutual love for God and for others—always taking, never giving, never discovering the joy of true life and love that comes through the real vine.

The vinedresser's tale is about life in community and the mutual love that supports that life. In Africa, they have a proverb that shows what this communal life and love are all about. It goes: *Because we are, I am.*² South African Bishop Desmond Tutu explained this proverb means: "We believe that a person is a person through other persons." I would describe it as another way of saying: we're all in this together, and we can all benefit, but only when we work together for the common good.

There's another story that makes the same point. It's about a western anthropologist who lived in Africa where he studied the culture of a remote African tribe. As he completed his work and prepared to return home, he put together a gift basket filled with delicious fruits from around the region and wrapped it up with a ribbon. He placed the basket under a tree and then he gathered the children of the village together.

The anthropologist drew a line in the dirt, and told the children: "When I tell you to start, run to the tree and whoever gets there first will win the basket of the fruit."

² Barbara J. Essex, "John 15:1-8, Homiletical Perspective," in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2, Lent Through Eastertide*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 477.

When he told them to run, the children all took each other's hands and ran together to the tree. Then they sat together around the basket and enjoyed their treat as a group.

The anthropologist was shocked. He asked why they would all go together when one of them could have won all the fruits for themselves?

A young girl looked up at him and said, "How can one of us be happy if all the other ones are sad?"³

This is a lesson in mutual love and care for the community. It is the same lesson Jesus imparted in the vinedresser's tale.

God desires for all to experience life through the self-giving love of God embodied, incarnated, in Jesus Christ. We can do so because Jesus chooses to live, to dwell, in us. We have a choice too: to live and love together as a community that is rooted in God's love. Let us pray for this to be so. Let us pray for the life that truly is life through God's love to bind us together in the true vine that is Jesus Christ. Let us pray for God to help us become strong branches, living in Jesus Christ, that produce the fruit of God's love in the world.

Would you pray with me:

Holy God, root of life, vine of love, we thank you for calling us into life with you and with each other. Help us always to seek that life and love that come from you. Clear away the clutter, the obstacles, the bad habits, and anything that prevents us from fully loving you and others. Fill us with the same love that weaves us together as one people, one Church, connected to the one vine that gives life to all. Enable us to produce the fruits of your love, so that all may come to experience the grace and peace that gives new life, through Jesus Christ, our True Vine. Amen.

³ James Clear, "How to Be Happy: A surprising Lesson on Happiness From an African Tribe," James Clear.com, article on internet, <https://jamesclear.com/how-can-i-be-happy-if-you-are-sad>, accessed 30 April 2021.