

April 2 I Am the True Vine

John 15:1-11

Jesus says, "I am the true Vine." To understand this "I AM" statement we again need to know the context. It appears in what is known as the "Farewell Discourses." In this series of teachings Jesus prepares the disciples for his death. He knows it will be a critical time for their faith. When you heard me reading this scripture one word was repeated over and over again. I counted ten times! That word is "abide." It is a word that we rarely use anymore. Understanding it helps us to grasp what Jesus was trying to share with his disciples. Almost always we hear a mutuality of action. We are to abide in Christ as Christ abides in us. What does this mean? Abide can mean stay with us as when, in the King James translation, the disciples on the road to Emmaus, that first Easter, encounter Jesus. As they are coming to their stopping place for the night they ask him to abide with them, or spend the night with them. But the word means much more. Abide means to be intimately intertwined or connected to another. In this scripture we think of the relationship of a vine to the branch.

Let me give you another image of abide. They had known each other since they were children. After marrying they worked side by side in their little business as they raised their family. They did everything together. In retirement, this continued. All of their friends and family thought of them as a unit. They finished each other's sentences and thought of the needs of the other in deciding what they would do each day. That is abiding in each other's love.

When Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches...Abide in me." it was his prescription for staying connected to God's power. Think about being a branch. In your mind stretch out your arms like a branch. I don't care whether you think of yourself as a grape vine, as Jesus' listeners would have thought when hearing this, or an apple tree which seems more in keeping with being a resident of Washington. On one side feel yourself connected to the vine or the trunk. On the other side imagine that you are holding up fruit. What is the role of the branch? It is to abide, to stay connected to the vine or trunk. If it does, it will produce fruit. The fruit is not the goal but a byproduct. It is

how you know you are abiding! Yet we tend to focus on the fruit and become disconnected from the vine.

Before we talk about how we abide in Christ and Christ in us while being a good branch we need to understand the significance of a vine to Jesus' listeners. The grapevine was an oft used symbol of Israel. Lots of Old Testament passages speak of Israel being God's vineyard. The grapevine came to symbolize the nation of Israel much like an eagle symbolizes America. When Jesus says he is the "True Vine" he is indicating that the same authority and power of God given to Israel lives in him. He implies that many of the teachers of Judaism at his time were false vines. We stay connected to God's power by staying connected to Christ. How? Jesus offers a vivid image. Be a branch.

We are first reminded about the Power of Pruning. Branches get pruned if you want trees or vines to produce the maximum amount of fruit. Pruning means removing excessive growth that robs the vine of its energy. Are there activities or relationships that sap your energy and are not productive? Do you feel that the real priorities in your life do not get the time and attention they need?

We are encouraged to take a Spiritual Energy Audit. We are to write down the areas of our life that deserve our greatest energy. What would those be? Certainly, there is self-care. That probably takes the most time. Think about how much time you need to spend asleep to keep your body rested. Think about how important it is to eat right and drink enough water. Second on that list should be faith. Think about how much time you need to maintain and nurture your spirit. What about other areas deserving prime energy? There would be family and friends. Perhaps you volunteer in helping out. We can list the things that are most important in our lives.

Now think about just one day in your life. Mentally list all the activities that you did that day. Think about how many robbed you of your best energy. Think about how few were connected to those areas of life that you say deserve your greatest energy. Now some activities, while not important, are necessary but others are just wasteful and could be pruned. Think about how much television you watch. Think about how much

idle talking you do? The questions to ask is this, "Does your time and energy get apportioned appropriately?" Usually we find we are out of balance. If we are to be a good branch we have to work at abiding in Christ and that means putting out energy into that relationship.

Wayne Cordeiro, pastor of New Hope Christian Fellowship, says pruning is protecting our five percent. Nearly 95 percent of what we do in life others can do. Only a few things only we can do, be a grandparent, spouse or take care of our souls. It's up to us to take care of the 5%. It doesn't mean that the other 95% is not important. It means we want to be productive.

There is also the value of Cutting Away. This is different from pruning. A gardener cuts away dead branches completely. If you don't they weaken the entire plant. They will never produce fruit but if they remain the plant puts a lot of energy into trying to hold them up. I had a shrub in the front yard. It was not doing so well. I had pruned it some but it was looking worse instead of better. A year ago spring, when I went to inspect it, I saw that almost all of the main stem had died, yet the roots were good. I got rid of all the dead wood. It looked pretty hideous last summer but was coming back. This spring I will be able to begin to prune and shape it.

We are asked, "What nonproductive branches might we identify in our personal lives?" These are things where we need to go further than just pruning them back but to getting rid of them. Some of the branches we need to cut away so we can abide are: regrets, living in the past, resentments, bitterness and envy to mention a few. These will sap energy from our faith life and make it impossible to abide.

Remember, you are a branch. You are to cling to the vine. On one side we have the vine, our life source. On the other side we have fruit. Our effectiveness is determined by which one we focus on, and in our world it is hard not to focus on the fruit. We live in a consumer culture where so much of our worth is measured by what we produce. We can obsess over the fruit. But fruit is not our job. Our job is to be a branch. Our job is to let God's power flow through us. We get into trouble when we begin to think we are the vine and we are producing the fruit and compare our fruit to others. Our

purpose is to honor God. When we do that we will produce fruit. If we focus on trying to accomplish things we become self-centered. When we focus on the vine, we admit we can't produce everything we ideally would like. We admit we need help. Then God's power flows through us and fruitfulness happens.

In closing let me share a couple of examples. The first is a negative one. Most of us have heard about the Wells Fargo Bank scandal. There was a push to open new accounts with bonuses and incentives for those who did. Everything was focused on the numbers. What happened is many people in the banks, to get those bonuses, started opening fake accounts in people's names. It looked like the bank was growing at a fantastic rate. It finally all came to light and people have been fired, customers have moved their accounts and it might be decades before the bank completely recovers. That focus on results got them into trouble. In an ideal world they would have focused on customer service and new accounts would have been the result.

The other story is from a church. She loves doing crafts and after retiring from work she started making greeting cards to give to friends. One day, in a Bible study, the question was asked, "What are you doing right now that could be used by God?" Immediately she thought about her cards. Since that time she has grown a little business selling the cards with the proceeds going to mission projects. Also, others wanted to learn from her so she created a group to make the cards. When they gather they also spend time in prayer and fellowship. Caring Notes are distributed through several churches and they are doing very well. It has filled up her days, especially after her husband's sudden death. In talking to me she said that she never thought her craft project would turn into this. By being faithful she has produced fruit. If her goal had been to make and sell cards as a money-making project it would have failed.

So, be a good branch. Be willing to be pruned so your priorities are correct, to eliminate dead stuff that saps your life and faith and always focus on the vine, the source of your strength and power.