

VINES & BRANCHES

The Gospel reading is one of seven times Jesus speaks the words “I am”. In John, He says **“I am the bread of life, “I am the light of the world”, “I am the door”, I am the good shepherd”, “I am the resurrection and the life”, “I am the way, the truth and the life”, and lastly “I am the true vine”**. Jesus has given us through His words a clear picture of who He should be to us as His followers, His disciples. And in all these passages Jesus goes on to explain **the relationship we can have with Him** and in some passages like today explains how that relationship can be less than ideal and even become non-existent!

The picture of a vine and its branches is something the people of Jesus’ day could certainly relate to and understand. They were an agricultural society and knew the relationship between the vine and its branches. The people knew what was needed to have a healthy vine that would produce fruit. There are actions that must be undertaken that seem at the time “brutal” like pruning!

I have learned though over the years that pruning is necessary for the plant or tree and its ability to produce fruit. Right along with pruning is something just as difficult – thinning which I would say is just as or even more important than pruning. The damaging results from not performing these functions I have seen as probably a number of you have too.

However, to bring this into our modern society instead of a vine and its branches how about the relationship between you and your smart phone? I will wager than many of us sitting here this morning have that phone within an arm’s reach, more about that later, back to the vine and the branches.

Not unlike last week when we focused on the flock and not the Good Shepherd, because we know the promises Jesus made to us, this week I want to focus on the branches because we know the vine, Jesus Christ! How “attached” are we to the vine?

Whenever you look out over a vineyard, especially near to harvest time, you can easily see the long-established and thick center vine trunk rising from the ground with a number of branches growing out from it. It is from these branches, leafy and green, those large clusters of grapes hang, maturing in the sun. Upon closer inspection there are many different types of branches growing from the main vine – some with a few grapes along their branches, some with no grapes just leaves. Others, with barely any leaves which could be immature or in the process of withering and dying and sadly there are those branches with no fruit, no leaves, and without a doubt are dead.

How can we this morning compare what we see in a vineyard to our lives in today's world? Jesus without a doubt tells us in today's Gospel that indeed there is a spiritual application and connection between Jesus and ourselves.

The first branch which is spoken about right after Jesus tells us that He is the true vine and God is the vinedresser or gardener, the caretaker is the branch that bears no fruit. Throughout the Old Testament in the Psalms, the song of Solomon, and Ezekiel, God's vineyard is Israel. Israel becomes desolate as figuratively the branches become separate from the vine. These non-bearing branches are cut off, discarded and eventually burned.

Any gardener knows such branches, suckers, can still take nutrients from the productive branches and bear no fruit. These branches are a breeding ground for bugs and disease. **We cannot become this type of branch! We must remain connected to the vine.**

We all have known a person, who because of events in their life chooses to turn away from their faith, living a life style no longer grounded in their faith. A life lived in disobedience to God and His ways. If we are not going to trust in God and live a life of faith then what or who are we going to put our faith and trust in-- the government, friends, family, or even ourselves? All these can change, sometimes overnight. A look at history and Nazi Germany is a perfect example – one day something, or someone is legal and the next day illegal, ask a survivor of the concentration camps.

Even here in the U.S. laws have dramatically changed in less than a lifetime, and things that were legal are no longer illegal. The question again is **“what are your trust and faith attached to? (story) so what is your “fuel”? What do you “run on” every single day of your life? Unless you depend on the true vine, Jesus Christ” and the Word you will run out of gas just like that float.**

We must be aware of when things become obstacles to our growth, because if we are not growing then we are in the process of dying and that does not occur overnight - it is a process. For branches, once strong, begin to wither until they is no more life in them. What are things we absorb that will begin and promote this process?

We as members of the our culture really do not like when things become old. We flock to the newest restaurant, a newer car even when the old one runs fine. Just look at cars in Cuba still running from the 50s! Advertising, the vehicle that has shaped our desires to want something we really don't need! Sadly, getting old is not desirable, yet around the world age is held in reverence. We can be withering because we have just gotten too comfortable.

In Deuteronomy 8, we told not to forget the Lord Your God, His commands and His laws and His blessings. Our affluency has made many put God aside, He is just not needed. Along with comfort we tend to become a creature of habit. Samuel Johnson said “habits are first cobwebs,

then cables. The chains of habit are too weak to be felt until they are too strong to be broken". We in our comfort become too judgmental. In doing so we are likely drawing attention away from the same faults in ourselves.

Jesus really knew what he was saying in Matthew 7 about the log in our eye! We can wither because we are "too busy". We must never let our relationship with Jesus suffer because we are too busy!

Don't become disconnected, watch for those early warning signs, skipping church for any old reason that sounds good at the time, skipping fellowship, more important things like the game on TV or getting to that sale, no time for devotions or reading the bible after all I have read it so many times I know what's in there.

The Bible is the Living Word and God has something in there for you and right where you are now!!!! If you have a fellow believer you sense going down that path speak up. We talked about "sins" of the tongue in Wednesday night Bible study and we discussed the idea that silence can be as much a sin of the tongue as speaking. We are in this together not only at Centennial, but with believers all over.

Now the second branch mentioned in the Verses today is one that is still connected, but will be pruned, ouch! We really don't like the thought of being pruned do we? I remember I was asked they'd say – "*this is for your own good*". Well, I guess I have to admit that if I ever even thought about doing it again, the very clear memory of that warning came to mind.

Going back to the vine and branches in order to produce more fruit there must be a certain amount of pruning. It is God's desire for us to have the best life and he knows we need to prune things out of our lives that rob us of that best life.

God's pruning takes on different methods. He can change things around us – friends, jobs, and circumstances. In such times we can cry out to God "why are you doing this to me?" Remember the gardener knows how to prune and God knows best what we need or don't need. An important point to remember however, we can always choose, using our free will, to ignore it or not accept it. He continues to love us, but like any parent He weeps inside because He knows how much we could benefit!

Many gardeners whether caring for fruit trees, flowers, or roses have a fond affection for their plants and want to see as many flowers or fruit as is possible. Think how much more God wants his branches, his people, to produce fruit.

The “how” a big secret, no, Jesus tells us in Verse 4 “remain in Me and I will remain in you”. That is how we become those fruitful branches. Staying connected to the true vine is the only way we can produce fruit. Now we tend to think as ingenious human beings we can do this faith/disciple thing our own way, because we are so creative! We all have thought that way one time or another, but in the last part of Verse 4 in Jesus’ own words He says **“for apart from Me you can do nothing”**. We may think we are doing just fine but sooner or later we will bump or even run into that wall!

What do we do to remain in Christ and Him in us? As a disciple we go back and remember that the first disciples had a relationship with Jesus. They talked to Him, they walked with Him, and they eventually went out to live a life like Him. By reading the Word we are witnesses to His ministry, and by praying we too talk with Him, and just like the first disciples by the power of the Holy Spirit within we can go out and be witnesses.

A story is told of a native from a remote mountain village who had the opportunity to visit a large modern city for the first time. He could not bring much home with him, and he had little money. But he was amazed at the electric lights which he saw everywhere. So he bought a sack full of electric lights bulbs and sockets with switches so he could turn them off and on. Arriving home he hung the light bulbs in front of his home and on his and his neighbor’s trees. Everyone watched him with curiosity and asked him what he was doing, but he just smiled and said, “just wait until dark--you’ll see.” when night came he turned on the switches, but nothing happened. No one had told him about electricity. He did not know the light bulbs were useless unless connected to the source of their power.

Neither will we “light up” or be fruitful. We too, must be connected to the source, and for us that source is Jesus Christ, the True Vine.

Amen.

