

THE VINE

I thank God that we get to take communion together today. I always need it, and sometimes I even know how much I need it. Sometimes our awareness of our need is greater than at other times. I happen to know that some of you particularly need communion today as well.

Before we get to our meal, let us come together in our usual fashion, to focus on our story – on the power and love of the Christ who is our source and meaning and purpose. To gather our scattered lives and thoughts and anxieties and confusion, I know of no better passage than this one from the fifteenth chapter of John’s Gospel: *“I am the vine, my Father is the gardener ... you are the branches.”* If together we do not produce grapes (fruit), there will not be any communion – between us, that is. The blood of Christ starts it, makes it possible – a thing beyond our power to produce. But we receive and respond: *“Love one another, as I have loved you.”*

We need to let the image of the vine sink in again. Let it have room in your mind. It can fill all the room you can give it. It is an image of the true church – the invisible church – of which our physical institutions are merely shadows: our sincere but feeble attempts to be the “church,” the *ecclesia*, the people of God. The Holy Spirit of Jesus the Christ is “like” a great vine with its vast trunk system encircling and crisscrossing the earth in every direction. Only gently, subtly, just barely out of sight. It carries nourishment for the soul to all parts of the globe – love, spiritual peace, beauty, truth, courage, hope, endurance, forgiveness, power. And we are all “like” branches attached to the great vine, able to draw from the source of all power and LIFE.

It is the truth about how it is with the realm of the Spirit. Of course, we could get hung up on the details of the imagery. A vine and branches – that is not it. Jesus only says, for lack of better words in our poor language, that the spiritual realm is something *like* this – an analogy. So we have to leap and go with the image. It is a spiritual vine. It is not limited by space or time. It is real, but not in a physical way. It is available, but not coercive. If people prefer, they can go on about their business without any acknowledgment that the vine is really there – with no appreciation or awareness that whatever sustenance they are getting is coming from this vine.

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The detriment, however, is that the flow of nourishment between the vine and its branches depends upon this appreciation and awareness. That may not be totally true; it may not be an absolute principle. But by our awareness and gratitude we limit or expand the amount of flow between us and the vine. We do not like to think of it in such terms; we do not like to think that some of our spiritual shortages are our own fault. Nevertheless, if the spiritual energy gets low or begins to dry up, it is because we forget to drink or refuse to drink from the vine. It is also wonderful to know this, of course, because then if our spirits begin to dry up, we know what to do about it: open up again – drink again from the vine!

THE VINE is the Life Force: the power, the nurture, true security, sustenance (in but not of this world). In Christian language, the Holy Spirit of Jesus the Christ is the Life Force. We are THE BRANCHES: reaching out, growing, exploring, learning – connectors between this spiritual power and the outer world. A branch does not die instantly when cut off from the vine. It may think it is just fine for quite a little while. But cut off, inevitably the sap begins to dry up. The branch apart, by itself, loses connection – meaning, it becomes increasingly brittle, bitter. It stops growing, expanding. Cut off, it begins to think and experience more and more about less and less, until it is only of self and unto itself.

Now, if Jesus had been trying to be a popular preacher or teacher, He would have kept this parable shorter and simpler. But NO, Jesus never leaves “well enough” alone – at least not what we think of as “well enough.” So here comes the Gardener. There is always a Gardener in Jesus’ stories, one way or another. Well, there is always God. This time, God is the Gardener.

Sometimes the Gardener plants; sometimes the Gardener cultivates; sometimes the Gardener irrigates or spreads plant food (see, I’m getting better). The Gardener does many, many things. In this particular parable, the Gardener is pruning. Clip, clip. Snip, snip. Some of the branches are saying, “Oh, thank you!” But many of the branches are saying, “Ouch! Don’t you know how much that hurts! I hate you.”

Some branches are saying “thank you” because they are tired of carrying the deadweight of past mistakes and old efforts that never produced anything and never will. They are glad to stop pouring energy into offshoots (some people call them “suckers”) that are never

going to bear any fruit. It is wonderful when the Gardener clears out all the tangle and gets rid of all the false goals we “sucker” into. Then we can get on with the real business of Life and spiritual growth.

Why do some branches say “Ouch! I hate you”? It doesn’t make much sense, but I’ve said it often enough myself to know why. Sometimes we forget that it takes grapes to make communion. We start thinking that we are here to acquire things – anything and everything. We forget that we are here to produce fruit. Whenever we get in that frame of mind, we deeply resent the Gardener.

The truth still is that any branch or twig that stops drinking in the nourishment from the vine begins to wither. Even if we know the truth but try to live it by our own power and resources, we begin to wither. Forgiveness, but out of the depths of our own understanding; trying to help others, but out of the pity of our own compassion; love, but out of the affection and acceptance of our own great hearts; dreams of great accomplishment, but out of our own need for fame or recognition – it will never work for long. We do not carry enough sap within us to do it very well or for very long – unless the vine is backing it up with its full and endless flow.

A withered branch is a branch that tries to be great enough to go it alone. “Give some people an inch and they think they are a ruler.” A “sucker” tries to steal it from others instead of getting it from the vine. While the “sucker” may be very plush itself, it never produces any fruit, and it never gets to experience communion.

Of course, some people make the parable even harder than Jesus intended it. They instantly jump to pictures of the Gardener cutting them off entirely, instead of just pruning. You would have to be totally dead to the Spirit before that could happen. And if that were the case, you wouldn’t care anymore about anything anyway, so no need to worry about that.

Pruning, I remind you, is not punishment. It is improvement – quality control. If you were not worth so much, the Gardener would not bother with the pruning. Pruning is a great favor – as long as it is left up to the Gardener. Which is to say that branches ought not to take it upon themselves to prune other branches! I have even seen branches so full of pride that they take it upon themselves to prune themselves. Only *the Gardener* does it well. And when the Gardener does it, it is also an act of love and is done in love.

Next the truth comes in at full strength – in all its grandeur and pathos, in all its hope and terror: “*No branch can bear fruit by itself, but only if it remains united with the vine.... APART FROM ME, YOU CAN DO NOTHING!*”

It reminds me of another phrase I once heard: “By myself, I am powerless.” Do you really know this? I must confess that I do not fully know it. Rather, I *know* it but I have not fully *learned* it. If I could fully and finally learn it, I would not keep running the gamut between momentary enthusiasm and battle fatigue. I keep wanting to do something on my own – sometimes for my own pleasure or glory, to be sure, but lots of times with my very best motives too. I keep wanting to do something on my own and in my own way. I don’t even like to hear it spoken, but we have to get real here if we are going to get anywhere. So I’m sorry, but sometimes I try to do things, well, to sort of “make Jesus proud of me.” It is a natural human desire, I suppose, to go off alone or in secret to win a battle or to build something good so we can bring it back to the Lord as a kind of special trophy. Maybe then the Lord will truly love us, by which we usually mean “bring us lots of special privileges” and “set us up above the other children.” Only, when we get finished with these tasks we do on our own, they reek of Satan, and all we have won for Christ is more time on the Cross.

We ought to know by now – I ought to know by now – that not just any kingdom will do. Some kingdoms should never have been built in the first place. The greatest failure of all is to succeed at something that never should have been started in the first place. But that is what happens when we set out to *earn* God’s love instead of *trusting* God’s love to be there for us already and always. When we trust it, we are on the vine. When we try to earn it, we are already cut off and we are withering.

Most of us do not get famous for our evil any more than we get famous for our good, but that does not limit or define the repercussions of our efforts in either direction. The most important thing to know in all Christendom next to the Gospel of God’s love itself is this great truth and warning: “*APART FROM ME, YOU CAN DO NOTHING.*” **STAY ON THE VINE!** I wonder what our world would be like today if all the Christians would get off of all the missions they have *not* been sent on. The only thing better would be if we also got onto the real missions that we *have* been sent on.

Maybe someone here today is feeling like the person in the Bible Study group who said, “I know some things I can do apart from Jesus.

I can brush my teeth and go to the movies and play golf without Jesus.” To which a friend replied, “I don’t know about your teeth, but that explains a lot about your golf game.” Most of us would nevertheless agree that we can make money, drive cars, practice law, build cities, or make scientific progress apart from Jesus if we choose to – at least apart from our conscious awareness of the Christ.

As always, John sees and reflects Jesus as the Eternal Spirit who was from the beginning – who always was and always will be, whether people are aware of it or name it or not. In that case, even brushing our teeth will not qualify as an exception. But giving it a half-truth rating, people can do many things without having any conscious awareness of the help they are receiving. Even that may be nit-picking. Hear the verse *“Apart from ME, you can accomplish nothing”* this way: Apart from Jesus Christ – the Vine – we can do nothing of value, nothing of importance, nothing for God’s Kingdom, nothing of eternal worth or value. In that light, there are no exceptions.

Pruning, despite its good purpose, is not really the Good News. And being reminded of my dependency on the vine, while it feels good for the perspective it brings, is not really the Good News either. But having felt the truth and the reality and the necessity of both, then the PROMISE comes in full strength and high glory: *“Anyone who dwells in me, as I dwell in them, bears much fruit.... Ask what you will, and you shall have it.”* This is assuming that we are on the vine, with the channels wide open. To be sure, being on the vine changes the nature of our requests. Still, there is no limit to the flow. In fact, if bearing fruit is what you are here for and care about, then the more you ask, the better the vine likes it.

I love that promise! Do you? I mean, half of my troubles are because I want to bear fruit: I want to do something right some day, accomplish something of value, make a difference for people, be a part of Christ’s Kingdom. It is the same for you, yes? And here is this glorious PROMISE. It is what we get from the vine that produces the fruit. If I stay on the vine, I don’t have to worry anymore about how well I am doing. And you don’t either. We cannot dwell in His love without producing fruit. It is a universal impossibility! That is where the joy gets complete. If we are on the vine, we are open to God’s power; whatever seems to be going on around us, fruit will come of it. (*“All things work together for good, for those who love God.”*)

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So we just keep “being there” – keep dwelling in Christ – and the power and love and LIFE of the vine takes over and flows freely. The stress goes out of the effort, the impossible tasks become the joyful play of trusting children, and the fruit grows.

It is not like that every day, for me; just sometimes. But I know it can be. It is more that way now, and more often than it used to be. Nevertheless, the power is not in me or in you or in us together. The power is in the vine. If we will drink, the fruit will grow. And that is the promise of the Christ!

PRAYER

The lathe of Heaven turns, Lord, and we are on it. We sometimes scream and rant and fret and swear, and say that we don't want to be on it, that we would rather be elsewhere. Until we stop and ask: Where would we rather be? On some desert isle? In some make-believe story? Perhaps in our own real world, where we are rich and privileged and blessed and fortunate, though all who are around us are starving and wretched and hopeless? No Lord, we could not stand that either. We would like to be rich to help the poor. But better to be together with the poor and the sick and the dying, than alone and rich ... or alone and well ... or alone and uncaring.

The lathe of Heaven turns, Lord, and we are on it. We thank You for that! We thank You for thinking us worthy of experiencing LIFE in Your dimensions. We thank You for all the joy and pain of LOVE and LIFE. Forgive us for complaining. Forgive us for wanting to escape. Welcome us anew as we turn back continually toward Thee.

The lathe of Heaven turns, Lord. Shape us as You will. We come rough-hewn - raw material - knowing not our true shape or design. Cut away as You must. Shape and form us, until we understand. Give us the likeness of the Son of Man, in whose name we now pray together, saying, *“Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.”*