

I Am the Vine

Fifth in Lenten Series: Who Do You Say I Am?

by

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March 21, 2021

John 15:1-17

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ⁹As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. ¹²"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

In her book, *Becoming Wise*, Krista Tippett writes a lot about civility. Her popular radio broadcast consists of interviews with a wide range of people from every conceivable branch of knowledge and discipline, and the book reflects what she has learned. The goal of her show, *On Being*, is to engage the moral imagination of her listeners to help them work toward social healing through civil conversations. Given the times in which we live, when there is much division and divisiveness, the topic of civility itself comes up regularly.

Tippett writes: “The practice of civility is an urgent need because we are living in an age where the question of what it means to be human has become inextricable from the question of who we are to each other.” She notes that a primary barrier to civility is the unsustainable notion that what holds us together are the things about which we agree. Rather, Tippett says, “Civility as something courageous insists there is value in learning to speak together honestly and relate to each other with dignity, without insisting on a goal of achieving common ground. That would leave all the hard questions hanging. Common ground is not the same thing as common life. If we insist that common ground be a prerequisite for common life, we diminish our range of possibility.”¹

I am the vine, says Jesus, you are the branches. He is giving his followers an image in order to help us claim our common life. This I Am saying of Jesus, I believe, calls people of the church, in this time of incivility, to think deeply about how we are connected to one another apart from the political or cultural differences that tend to divide us. When John wrote the gospel a generation or two after Jesus walked around Galilee, the early church was trying to clarify its identity. What did their common life together mean? They were trying to figure out how to be faithful in a world which was downright hostile to the gospel.

¹ Krista Tippett, *Becoming Wise*.

John's community was made up of early Jewish Christians who were sorting out their relationship with the synagogue. Some were thrown out of their local synagogue for believing in Jesus Christ. Others were trying to assimilate their belief in Jesus as a new revelation alongside their very old Jewish understandings of God and the commandments that governed the children of God. They had their scriptures and their traditions, their opinions and their experiences of the Risen Lord; but they needed help in articulating their peculiarity in the culture around them, and their particularity as a Christian community. When folks started arguing about their essential mission, they needed to know what guided them to help make sense of who they were and what they were supposed to do.

Was it their role to be gatekeepers trying to keep account of who belonged in the church and who did not belong? Was it their task to maintain doctrinal purity? Were they called by a dogged faithfulness to some social justice agenda? Their question of identity was: what is the most important thing for the church to do in the name of Jesus Christ? And on the far side of that question, they remembered something Jesus said: *I am the vine, you are the branches... As the Father loved me, so I have loved you. Abide in my love and love one another. Abide in my love and your joy will be complete.*

These images of Vine and Branches, of being connected to God and to one another through love are drawn from very familiar Old Testament images, for in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Hosea – all – ancient Israel is depicted as God's vineyard. To *bear fruit* is a common image from the Hebrew scripture to speak of the community's faithfulness in response to God's word. These are comforting images but also prophetic ones, meaning they are concerned about the activity of God's community for the peace, wellbeing and justice for all people.²

² Gail O'Day & Susan Hulen, *John: Westminster Bible Commentary*, p. 151-2.

In the gospel, John’s reworking of this ancient metaphor claims Jesus is the *fruitful vine*, God is the *vine grower* who prunes and cares for the vine, and the people of the church are invited to see themselves as *branches* abiding in the vine that is Jesus. The community of the church finds our identity, our source of life and faithfulness in Jesus and thereby bear the fruit of love. *No one has greater love than this*, Jesus tells us, *than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends*. That is what Jesus did – for God so loves the world. What God has done for us in Christ tells us who we are and what we are to do. We are branches, because Christ the Vine has loved, nurtured, pruned and sustained us to do – his work in the world.

In his book, *The Second Mountain*, David Brooks tells the story of Mary Gordon who founded the Roots of Empathy project in Ontario which uses babies to create rich connections in schools. Once a month a parent and an infant visit a classroom. They sit on a green blanket and the class gathers around to watch what the infant is doing. They observe the infant try to crawl to something or reach for a toy. They watch the interaction between parent and child. They are learning to put themselves in the mind of a baby, learning emotional literacy, and learning how deep attachment works. In one class there was an eighth-grade boy Mary Gordon called Darren, who had witnessed his mother’s murder when he was four and had been bounced around the foster care system ever since. He was bigger than everybody else in the class since he was two grades behind. One day, much to everybody’s surprise, Darren asked to hold the baby. He looked scary, and the mother was nervous, but she let him, and Darren was great with the baby. He went over to a quiet corner and rocked the infant while the baby snuggled on his chest. Darren returned the baby to his mother and asked innocently, “If nobody has ever loved you, do you think you could still be a good father?”³

³ David Brooks, *The Second Mountain*, p. 274-5.

Friends, the love in which we abide and show forth is not a sentimental love. It is the activity of growing toward others like young Darren – who have been neglected, the victim of violence, a child wondering if he were unlovable. In this season of division and divisiveness and incivility in our country, Christian people can still claim a single deep attachment. We will not agree with each other. We do not agree with each other about political issues, cultural problems and how to solve them, or even the direction of the church as we work for peace and justice. And yet, apart from everything that divides us, we are connected to one another.

We share deep connections to God and to one another as branches who show forth the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ. Being church is about being a community of prophetic witness to that love. We love one another because we have been loved by the One who laid down his life for his friends.

A few years ago, Archbishop Desmond Tutu met with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Toward the end of their time together, the Archbishop offered a blessing which I think grows out of this Vine Jesus says he is. Tutu said: “Dear Child of God, you are loved with a love that nothing can shake, a love that loved you long before you were created, a love that will be there long after everything else has disappeared. And God wants you to be like God. Filled with life and goodness – and joy. God, who is forever pouring out God’s whole being from all eternity, wants you to flourish. God wants you to be filled with joy and excitement, ever longing to find... God’s compassion, caring and sharing. And God says, Please my child, help me. Help me to spread love and compassion. As you do this – you discover joy. Joy which you had not sought, comes as the gift, as the reward for this non-self regarding caring for others.”⁴

⁴ The Dalai Lama & Desmond Tutu with Douglas Abrams, *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*, 2016.

You know, that is almost exactly what Jesus said. I am the Vine; you are the branches. *I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.*

AMEN.