

I AM THE VINE

John 15: 1-11

Fourth in a series of six sermons

Fifth Sunday in Lent

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First Federated Church

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Text: *I am the true vine*

Jesus sure knew how to step on toes. Because we are so familiar with a particular passage that we do not realize how it sounded to his first listeners. In today's text Jesus fired a shot across the bow of many of his listeners. In order to understand how radical his comments were, we need to have an understanding of how they would have first heard them.

When Jesus said that he was the *true vine* he employed an image that cut to the very heart of his Jewish faith. Throughout the Old Testament Israel's relationship with the LORD was described in terms of a vine or a vineyard and an owner.

The prophet in Isaiah 5 wrote

*For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts
is the house of Israel,
and the people of Judah
are his pleasant planting; (vs.7)*

Hosea wrote:

*Israel is a luxuriant vine
that yields its fruit. (10:1a)*

And the 80th Psalm sang of the Exodus in these terms

*You brought a vine out of Egypt;
you drove out the nations
and planted it. (8)*

There is a downside to being *called* or *chosen* by God. As Jesus once said at another time in another place, *to whom much has been given much will be expected*. The prophets chastised the nation for not living up to their calling. Isaiah's *pleasant planting* fell short.

*For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts
is the house of Israel,
and the people of Judah
are his pleasant;
he expected justice,
but saw blood shed;
(he expected) righteous,
but heard (the cry of injustice)!*

Hosea intentionally married a cultic temple prostitute. One wag noted that any resemblance between Hosea and his children was purely coincidental! He used his marriage as a metaphor for the nation's unfaithfulness to the LORD. As often as Hosea

found himself redeeming his wife from prostitution in cultic temples, the LORD redeemed Israel when it chased and worshipped foreign gods.

By saying that he is the *True vine* Jesus was saying that he stood in the place of an unfaithful Israel. In other words, he was *real*—genuine. Through him Israel was able to fulfill its calling. This did not set well with his listeners, to say the least.

It was a common belief then, though, and common throughout human history until the last fifty years or so, that we are connected to one another. One person's actions affects everyone one else. In the word of the 17th century English cleric and poet Jon Donne, *No one is an island entire unto itself, but each is a part of the main. One person's death diminishes me. Ask not for whom the bell tolls; the bell tolls for thee.*

The belief that one person could fulfill a nation's responsibility was a common concept in Israel's history. For example, when David sinned with Bathsheba the nation stumbled. The nation suffered the consequences of his sin for it was torn apart by civil war for the rest of its days.

This understanding of our *connectedness* with one another is also seen in Paul's letter to the Romans. Writing of "the Fall" of Adam in Genesis and the Resurrection of Christ he wrote:

Just as one person did it wrong and got us in all this trouble with sin and death, another person did it right and got us out of it. But more than just getting us out of trouble, he got us into life! One man said no to God and put many people in the wrong; one man said yes to God and put many in the right. (5: 18, 19, The Message)

Our test also reminds us that the vine is judged by the fruit that it produces. Unproductive vines—branches—are cut off and cast aside.

Jesus once told a story of a man with two sons. He told the first, "Go out into the field and do 'this or that.'" The son said that he would but instead he went out with his friends. The father told his second son to go out into the field. This son said that he would not but later he changed his mind and went out into the field as his father had asked. "Which of the two sons," Jesus asked his listeners, "did the will of the father?"

It's not about good intentions, it is about action.

Several years ago I attended a continuing education event put on by two church consultants named Easam and Bandy. William Easam wrote a very insightful book entitled, *Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers*. In his talk he told us that according to his research four out of five churches in existence today will not be in existence fifty years from now either because they could not or would not change. Those that can not change are the little rural churches who a century ago found themselves surrounded by large families on eighty acre farms. Today those same churches find themselves surrounded by farms that are a thousand or more acres in size. Their population base is simply gone.

Those that will not change are those who pine for the "flesh pots" of their "Egypt"; they would rather pine about the glory days of yesteryear and avoid the work of today. Make no mistake about it; our text reminds us that ultimately God's will *will* be done. If we are unwilling to do it, God will find another to do the work of the Kingdom.

A third thing that this lesson tells us is that we must be *connected* if we are to be successful in our calling.

Several years ago, believe it or not, a woman asked her husband for a particular brand of vacuum cleaner. It was a top of the line model that she thought would make her work a breeze. For Christmas that year the husband bought his wife the vacuum cleaner

and she was so excited that she immediately reached behind the Christmas tree in the living room and plugged it in. She began to vacuum with great gusto when suddenly the machine shut off. She flipped the switch and it started up again only to shut off after a few seconds. She flipped the switch again and the same thing happened. Her husband grew concerned and he tried. Same results. Disgusted, he decided that the vacuum was defective and that he would have to take it back in the morning. When he reached behind the Christmas tree he discovered the problem. The vacuum had been plugged into the Christmas lights switcher plug! Whenever it would lose its current, it would quit!

That is the way it is with us. We are called to be connected to the source of our power. *Cut off from me*, Jesus said, *you can do nothing*. How do we stay connected? We do it by taking Jesus seriously. We take him at his word. At the risk of sounding like a one-note Nelly I think that we do it by incorporating four spiritual disciplines into our lives.

The first discipline is **Prayer**. Set aside some time in the morning to ask God to lead you through the day, and some time at night to review the day with the LORD, to ask for forgiveness and to turn the concerns of the day over to the Almighty for the night.

The second discipline is **Worship**. Developing the habit of worship begins before Sunday morning. It begins the decisions that we make on Saturday night. It begins with how we structure our week. There is a big difference between planning our week around worship and fitting worship in to an already over-scheduled life.

The third discipline is **Study**. Serious Bible study allows us to reflect upon, in greater depth, where God may be leading us as individuals and as a group

The final spiritual discipline is **Service**. We've been saved to serve. Jesus said that whenever we reach out in ministry to the "least" we are also reaching out to him. In other words, whenever we serve the least we serve the Best; the Risen Lord.

Our gospel lesson ends this morning with Jesus telling his disciples the Father is glorified by the fruit that the disciples of Christ bear in this world. Together, let us be bearers of fruit fit for the Kingdom. Amen.