

“Knowing God’s Power”

March 22, 2015

The God We Can Know series --- 5th Sunday in Lent

My aunt and uncle used to live in a house with a small barn in the back. There was a fence around the barn, and every year, there were grapes that grew around the fence. The vines reached up the fence, and I remember my mom picking delicious grapes for homemade grape juice. But those grapevines were so intermingled together that there was no separating them. You can’t tell where one stops and another begins, but they all need to be connected to the vine to grow.

If you would, hold out your arms. Stretch out one arm and take hold of the imaginary vine. With the other arm, stretch out and act as if that arm is a branch.

Today we hear the last of Jesus’ identity statements in the Gospel of John: “I AM the true vine.” But Jesus doesn’t stop there. He also describes God – “my father is the farmer or gardener.” And he doesn’t stop there, but speaks to those who seek to follow him: “You are the branches.”

The vine was a very familiar image. It was a symbol for God’s chosen people, and we read about vineyard and vine hundreds of times throughout Scripture. In particular, the vine and vineyard are used by Old Testament prophets to describe how God’s people were not bearing good fruit. Isaiah 5 says:

I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard:

My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside.

He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines.

He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well.

Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit.

God’s people were not faithful to the covenant they made with God. They turned away from God, and God did some pruning. The prophets understood the exile as God’s ultimate pruning.

I’m not a big gardener, but I read up on pruning:

To keep a vigorous climber healthy, you must do the following:

- Remove any dead, damaged, diseased, or unproductive stems.
- Remove overly tangled stems.
- Remove errant stems, especially those growing away from the support.
- Direct its growth.
- Limit its growth.

Don't forget, though, that pruning doesn't just reduce mass: It can increase it. Heading back stems encourages new growth.

So there's the promise of new life even in pruning.

One scholar notes that in the great wine regions of the world, grapevines grow on steep hillsides where erosion has stripped away the topsoil and where the weather is hot and dry. Wine experts say that in order to produce truly great wine, the vines must suffer.

And the part about pruning is true. In the fall in wine country, you can see long, lush grapevines along wires that guide their growth. But in the spring, the vines have been pruned away, leaving only the roots, the trunk, and some limbs along the wires. Later on, these limbs produce many fingers that will become beautiful, long vines and yield lots of grapes.

Jesus is the true vine – the One who is God's saving presence in our midst. And when Jesus says "I AM the true vine," he and his disciples have just shared what we call the Last Supper, which included sharing the fruit of the vine. Jesus speaks to them before his crucifixion. The tension has come to a high point. It is after they share the meal together that Jesus is arrested. For all that's ahead, this image is powerful. When the disciples wonder what to do, perhaps Jesus hopes that they'll remember what he says.

They would have known that image from the prophets well, and it compels us to put Jesus' role in our lives and our response in perspective. A word that we need to keep in our hearts and minds from these eight verses is "remain." "Abide" is another translation of the Greek word that's used. And it means "stay close." Don't leave or get distracted, but stay connected. Be in relationship. That's how we experience God's power working in us.

Jesus explains that if we abide in him, then we bear fruit. If we stay close, we have life and energy. "I AM the vine; you are the branches." Branches don't make fruit; branches bear fruit because they're connected to the vine. If you've ever looked at any vine structure - grapes, watermelons, or tomatoes, you can't tell the separate branches apart.

And when we stay close to the vine, when we bear fruit, God is glorified – there's no sense of individual achievement, but what God can do in us and through us. It's easy to give up when we think we're doing it all alone, but Jesus' image of the vine and branches challenges us to consider what it means to be connected to him as Savior and Lord - and to each other.

Together we are an example of God's power at work in the world! That's not license to think that we're better than anyone else, but I hope it's reason for us to share God's love with others. It's a reminder of the power of God to transform our hearts and lives - to ultimately change us.

Think of a time when you've felt the power of God at work. Maybe it was a time when you were going through a struggle and God held you up. I have the privilege of hearing people talk about the presence and power of God when they go through difficult times. And God's presence and power usually go together. Or maybe yours was a moment when you accepted Christ into your life - when you understood God's great love for you - and you understood the power of God's love to overcome your sin and offer you new life and hope and freedom.

We need to remember God's power. It's real. It's something we can talk about. Consider your faith life right now - today. Jesus' expectation is that we're connected - that we stay close to him. Jesus expects us to bear good fruit. And he challenges us.

Of all the activities that demand our time and energy, which ones truly glorify God? What needs to change? What do you need to stop doing - to get rid of - so that you can stay connected to Jesus Christ? It may be something worthwhile, but we have to figure out what's productive and where God can best produce fruit in our lives.

Sometimes there are dead branches that need to go. They can't produce anything, and in fact, they weigh us down and make it more difficult to feel God's presence and power? Maybe you've experienced that with regrets, resentment, holding onto bitterness and envy.

Are we connected to him and focused on that connection so that our lives show that connection? You see, we can become too focused on what we're producing - always looking at the fruit - without remembering to stay close and abide in Christ.

We can also compare our fruits to someone else's. That's not too helpful either. The call of Christ is to abide in him, and when we do, God's power flows through us. We love like God loves. We seek truth and keep on seeking to live faithfully. We know deep joy in Christ, and we know the true life in him.

Where are you feeling God's power the most today? Is it in prayer? Is it in the community of faith - the Body of Christ - where you see other branches and find strength? Do you sense God's power through Scripture - the right words at the right time? Is God moving in you to give more generously and rely on God more fully? Are you excited to share God's power in your life with someone else? Do you know someone who needs to hear your story of God's love and care?

Staying close to Jesus requires daily effort and commitment. Jesus uses the vine and branches as a reminder of God calling us to faithfulness whatever the situation.

This is about being connected to Jesus constantly and over the long haul - not just sometimes, but all the time.

Jesus doesn't promise an easy life free of struggle or painful growth, but a life connected to him that bears fruit when we abide in his love and share it. And that's key – that we abide in Jesus – that we stay close to him – so that we can bear fruit that transforms the world around us.

We love the idea that Jesus stays close to us, but how do we stay close to him? Abiding in him – staying close – drives us into the world to witness to who Jesus is – Lord and Savior of our lives. And we should have some fruit to show. Do our lives embody what Jesus is talking about? Does our church embody it?

Those who follow Jesus Christ are defined by one marker, which is love, says the writer of First John. Love isn't something we know how to do; it's something God teaches us through others. God is the source of love. "Love comes from God." "God is love." Love is an action verb because of what God does in Jesus Christ.

We are formed into faithful disciples of Jesus Christ throughout our whole lives through his love that we experience in family, friendship, and community. We remember faithful people who stay close to the vine and who have nurtured us in faith. And we hear Jesus' words again: "I AM the vine; you are the branches." We have the opportunity and the command from Christ to go and bear fruit.

Hold out your arms again. Take hold of the vine with one hand, and let the other arm be a branch.

Friends, may we stay close and be fruitful and faithful.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.

I am who I am - is God enough for us?

I am the bread of life - satisfaction

I am the light of the world - guidance

I am the gate and Good Shepherd - care