

## **Fifth Sunday of Eastertide**

**John 15:1-8; Psalm 22:25-31; Acts 8:26-40; I John 4:7-21**

**John 15:1-8** is one of the best-known metaphors in the Gospel of John. Jesus declares to his disciples, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide 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. I 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” (15:1-5).

Jesus makes three primary points in this sharing with the disciples. First, he states that it is he who is the vine, while they are its branches (15:4-5). Second, the work of the branches is to “bear much fruit” (15:2, 8). Third, the branch remains fruitful through its dependence upon and its abiding in the vine (15:4-7). What does Jesus mean by these three assertions?

This is the final “I Am” statement appearing in the Gospel of John. “I am the vine”. But what does he mean by “vine”? In order to be able to unpack this extremely pivotal statement by Jesus to his disciples, we must first ask and answer the question, “What did the metaphor of vine mean to the Jewish people of Jesus’ day?” And that requires us to ask, “How was the metaphor of “vine” used in the Old Testament”?

The image of the vine is used over 200 times in the Old Testament. It was a crucial image for a nomadic people, because it was an indication of the intentional transition of that people from being nomads who followed their flocks to being a settled people, becoming “rooted” in a single place. This was because the first thing “settlers” would do would be to plant vineyards (which then required them to “stay put” in order to tend those vines). And that vineyard would, with care, likely continue to grow and supply that people with sustenance for hundreds of years. The presence of the vineyard would very literally “root” these nomads in a single place, and thus would enable them to settle down, build villages and even cities, and thus build a civilization for themselves. They might continue to raise herds of sheep or goats and follow those flocks as they foraged for food, but they would now have a place where they were anchored, to which they would always return.

It is intriguing that when the metaphor of vine is used throughout the Hebrew Bible, it is always used of Israel itself. And the essential message communicated by the prophets using this image to describe Israel was that Israel was a failed vineyard. Thus, in Isaiah 5:1-7, Israel is likened to a formerly productive vineyard planted and tended by Yahweh. Such loving care should have meant that this vineyard would bring forth choice grapes. But, instead, it has brought forth only wild grapes, and will therefore be dug up and disposed of by Yahweh.

Likewise, Jeremiah 2:21 states that Israel, planted by God as God’s vineyard, has become degenerate. Ezekiel 19:10-14 laments a great vineyard (“Mother Israel”) that is “plucked up” and “cast down”, and thus destroyed. And Hosea 10:11 depicts Israel as an empty vine that brings forth fruit that only benefits itself, and not God nor the world. In each case, Israel is “the vine” of God, demonstrates that it has become an unproductive vine, and is thus rejected by God.

For Jesus to declare, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower” (15:1) was both most shocking and totally unexpected. In so declaring himself the “true vine”, Jesus makes the first of three primary points. First, he declares that he – and not Israel – is the true vine, that his followers are only branches of the vine, and that God is the vine-grower (15:1-5).

At the time Jesus made this statement, this was an exceedingly shocking statement. By doing so, Jesus has done three things. First, he has put himself in the place of Israel, in essence stating that *he* is the chosen person rather than Israel as the chosen people. Second, he has stated that he is the “true” vine, as opposed to Israel as the “false” vine”. By using the word “true”, Jesus recalls the Jeremiah 2:21 passage, in which the prophet states that although God chose Israel as the “true” vine, their faithlessness has required that “trueness” to be passed on to another. Now, Jesus states that it is he who has inherited that true and faithful role that Israel was to play. Finally, Jesus states that “my Father is the vine grower”. What makes the true vine true is the presence of the vine grower who cares for it and tends it. Therefore, the vine remains true only if it is centered in “abiding” in God (which Israel, Jesus here implies, certainly did not do).

Thus, the church is not the true vine. It is simply the branches, the offshoots of the true stock, the vine. The branches of a grape vine might cover several acres of land and be highly productive. But what gives those branches the power to bear fruit is the vine stock’s rootedness in the ground. Thus, the branches are peripheral to the stock, and may be from time-to-time cut off (in fact, will be cut off as part of the pruning necessary to create the most productive vine). But it is the stock of the vine that is important and must be maintained, and it is the vine grower’s job to so maintain it. Thus, what Jesus is saying here is that it is he and not his disciples who has taken Israel’s place – who is the new, true and faithful Israel. He is the vine!

Second, the work of the branches is to “bear much fruit” (15:2, 8). The very existence of all those who follow Jesus is justified only by whether they “bear much fruit”. But what is actually meant by “bearing fruit”?

For centuries, the traditional answer of the church has been that “to bear much fruit” means to convert people to belief in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. That interpretation is so widely believed that many simply use farming terms for witnessing to one’s faith, such as referring to those won to Christ as “the harvest” or “fruit”.

But is that what Jesus was talking about when he called upon disciples to “bear much fruit”? The words, “bear fruit” do not themselves convey the meaning of “winning of souls”. The term itself simply means to be productive. It is the later association by the church to the winning of individuals to Christ that turns this statement into a soul-winning metaphor.

To be accurate in understanding what Jesus meant by “bear much fruit”, one must ask, “What did ‘to bear fruit’ mean in Jesus’ day?” And once again, we can’t answer that question without referring to the Hebrew Bible.

To “bear fruit” was a common Old Testament term to speak of a community’s faithfulness or obedience to God. Thus, Psalm 1:3 tells us that those who take delight in the Law and are

faithful in obedience to it are those who are “like trees planted by streams of water which bear their fruit in its season”. Conversely, the vineyard so carefully tended by God yielded “only wild grapes” (Isaiah 5:2b); it was not faithful to God’s call (5:1) to it. Likewise, God says of Israel in Jer. 2:21, “I planted you as a choice vine from the purest stock. How then did you turn degenerate and become a wild vine?” The vine had obviously not been obedient to God’s law and had proven faithless to the covenant.

“To bear fruit”, therefore, meant to the Jew of Jesus’ day that one was living out in his or her own life the covenant made between Israel and Yahweh “to do justice, to love each other with forgiving love and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). One’s “fruit” or actions was proof positive that one was being faithful to the shalom vision for one’s society that manifested itself in justice, equitable distribution of wealth and oneness with God.

Understanding “bearing fruit” as being faithful to the shalom covenant made between God and humanity rather than understanding it as the saving of souls is the only interpretation that makes sense of this passage from the Gospel of John. John has Jesus say, “My Father removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned” (15:2, 6).

Stop and think about what Jesus is saying here. If what Jesus means by “bearing much fruit” is the task of converting people to Christ, then if a Christian doesn’t win souls to Christ, “my Father removes him” from among the faithful. Christ throws away and burns all those who have proven themselves useless to him because they haven’t won people to Christ. Therefore, what is logically being taught here is that salvation doesn’t come through God’s act of grace, appropriated through our faith. Rather, it comes through our good works of winning people to Christ.

How can I make that conclusion? If it is your winning of people to Christ that determines whether you are to be judged by God as worthy or useless, so that God either keeps you or throws you into the fire, then that means that – in the final analysis, you believe that your good works “witnessing to Christ” guarantees you eternal life. In other words, you are ultimately saved by your work of winning souls! Do you really want to say that?

On the other hand, if what “bearing fruit” means is being faithful to the covenant made between God and God’s people – that is, the practice of the shalom community – then this passage means something entirely different. Jesus is saying that those who say they are following Jesus and yet act with greed, oppression, avarice, seeking to control humanity, or the ignoring of the plight of the poor, are acting in a way that is a direct contradiction to God’s intentions for humanity. In the case of such people, we must inevitably conclude that they are not and have never been a part of that shalom community. Therefore, their being “gathered, thrown into the fire and burned” is the inevitable consequence of their unwillingness to embrace Christ and His Kingdom.

On the other hand, if they are seeking to be faithful and obedient to Christ in their actions and in their lives, such action is the inevitable manifestation that they have made such a faith commitment. In their situation, therefore, God will “prune” them in order to increase their

faithfulness, because no human being is fully committed to God's kingdom. Thus God, in his grace and mercy, allows us to experience hard times, misfortune or rebuke in order to deepen our commitment to him.

Perceiving "bearing much fruit" as faithfulness to Jesus' shalom community makes the most sense, when one considers the primary theme of the Gospel of John. That theme is that Jesus has come to Israel as the countercultural Christ who is building an alternative community to that of the Judean political, economic and religious leaders who have embraced the values of greed, oppressive power and religious control while espousing the Mosaic values of justice, equity and relationality. Therefore, living out in one's life and actions a relational and just faith is proof positive that the disciple "bears much fruit". The follower of Jesus is called to be faithful and obedient as the sign that he or she does, indeed, belong to Jesus' alternative community.

Third, the branch remains faithful through its dependence upon and its abiding in the vine (15:4-7). A recurring sub-theme running through this scripture is the necessity of the Christian and the Christian community to "abide" in Jesus in order to sustain that Christian's faithfulness to Christ and his kingdom.

This is a logical extension of the vine analogy. The vine stock (i.e., Jesus) is rooted in the nourishment and empowerment that the vine grower (God) gives to it through his tending, watering and fertilizing the soil. Thus, the vine stock is alive and useful to God as long as it "abides" (that is, receives its nourishment and life) in God.

Likewise, the branches remain alive, healthy and bear fruit to the degree that they remain connected to the vine. Those branches receive their nourishment from the vine stock. Thus, to the degree that they "abide" in the vine (as the vine "abides" in God) will they remain faithful, obedient and consequently useful to both the vine and to the vine-grower.

That was the problem with Israel as it was led astray by the Judeans (the religious, political and economic aristocracy of Israel) in every age. The branches no longer remain connected to the vine, but went their own way. The result was that they dried up, no longer useful to God, to God's vision for Israel or even to themselves.

What Jesus is essentially saying to his community of faith is that they will remain vital in their faith and love and obedient to Jesus' intentions for the world only as they remain in an intimate relationship with him. They must "abide" or "remain" in him. The word "abide" communicates permanence and steadfastness about it – a "keeping on keeping on". The very choice of this word by Jesus expresses his commitment to build an alternative community to humanity's typical society of unilateral power, greed and alienation. Jesus desires to create not only a community centered in relationship with God, just and equitable, but also a community that lasts forever – that "abides"!

The Christian community must be built upon embrace, Jesus is developing here – a continuing dynamic relationship with God through relationship with Jesus, and a vital, caring relationship with one another. Only being a Godly, loving presence with each other and a life of mutuality provides the foundation by which the Christian community can both be God's continually-

alternative community to the world and God's means for building that world. "The vine imagery symbolizes how the life of the Christian community is shaped by love and intertwined with the abiding presence of God and Jesus".<sup>1</sup>

**Psalm 22:25-31** is a part of this larger psalm that is all about obedience to God's call. It is the description of how one who is faithful to Yahweh has to bear the consequences of such faithfulness. And that ultimate consequence is death!

It was Psalm 22:1 that was quoted by Jesus from the cross (Matthew 27:46). But many biblical scholars believe that he actually quoted the entire psalm rather than just its opening lines. The reason why that possibility is suggested is that it is *the* classical prophecy of the suffering and execution of God's suffering servant, his "Son of Man", the Messiah.

It begins with a powerful cry for help directed to God. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest" (22:1-2).

It is a very poignant and powerful cry of distress. The servant feels utterly abandoned by God and rejected by humanity (22:7-8, 9-10, 14-15, 17-18, 22, 24). It therefore captures the very essence of the pain of those who would follow Yahweh in utter obedience – but most eloquently of all, by the Son of Man (Messiah).

Thus, this psalm is a hymn of dismay and suffering. But suddenly, it changes. It changes from dismay to delight, from suffering to triumph. And that section is the lesson from the Psalms for the Fifth Sunday of Eastertide.

"From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear him. The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the Lord. May your hearts live forever.

"All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him. For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations.

"In him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before him shall bow all you who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him. Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it" (22:25-31).

The grief and depression of the Psalm turns into joy and wholeness – almost as if death gives way to resurrection. The Psalmist doesn't end his lament with the eradication of the One chosen by God. Rather, God works in a mysterious way in the midst of that One's suffering and demise to bring forth triumph and victory. And there will be four results of this "resurrection", the Psalmist suggests.

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<sup>1</sup> Gail R. O'Day, "The Gospel According to John", *The New Interpreter's Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), p. 1939.

First, “the poor shall eat and be satisfied” (vs. 26), so that the human condition will be addressed by God’s triumph over death and its physical, social and economic needs met. Second, “future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn” (vs. 30-31), so that the good news of God’s rescuing love will be spread to all. Third, “all the families of the nations shall worship before him” (vs. 27), so that people from every nation will be brought into relationship with God and each nation reconciled to him. And finally (and most remarkable of all), “to him shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him” (vs. 29). All who have died “in him” shall be resurrected into new life!

In other words, what is being laid out by this Psalmist is a rebirth of the Shalom Community. With the suffering and death of God’s chosen one (22:1-24), the realization of God’s intentions for humanity seemed defeated and all of life looked dark. But God acted to bring life to death, triumph to defeat, liberation to oppression. As a result, the poor were freed from exploitation and wealth equitably distributed, justice prevailed and humanity was brought into a vital relationship with God and each other – including even those who had died! In other words, the Shalom Community came into being as the result of God’s intervention through the death of God’s servant!

**Acts 8:26-40** is the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. Philip was one of the “Hellenists” (that is, Jewish Christians who spoke and prayed only in Greek and were likely from a Gentile town or region; the name “Philip” is a Greek name). Representatives of these “Hellenists” were made deacons of the church (Acts 6:1-7) and, although they served the people physically, also shared the gospel. What is significant in this passage is that the Ethiopian eunuch is also a “Hellenist”.

The story of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch is the conversion of an “outsider” by an “outsider”, and thus is a foreshadowing of what will be the dominant theme of the book of Acts – the movement of the gospel from a Jewish environment into the Gentile world. This text tells us that the eunuch is the treasurer of the court of the queen of Ethiopia (“Candace” is not the name of the queen, but instead is her title), an African nation south of Egypt. There was a strong Jewish presence in Ethiopia, and apparently this eunuch had been greatly influenced by that community. He had been to worship at the Jerusalem Temple; that would imply that he was either a Jew of the diaspora or a Gentile proselyte.

As he was on his way returning in his chariot to the court of his queen, he was reading aloud Isaiah 53, wondering whether the author was speaking of himself or of another person. Philip, brought by the Spirit to that place, heard him musing (in the ancient world, everyone read out loud) and interrupted him. Philip opened the scriptures to him, telling him “the good news about Jesus”. Thus, Philip identifies the servant in Isaiah 53 with the “Suffering Servant”, Jesus. Luke implies here that Philip did not stop with Isaiah, but then went on to demonstrate from other Old Testament passages that Jesus was the Messiah. The response of the eunuch was to embrace Jesus as the Christ, and request to be baptized. Thus, Philip baptized the eunuch, who then returned to the Ethiopian court as a Christian.

Philip is portrayed in this passage as a clear example of one who “bore much fruit”, as he reached out in faithfulness and obedience to this eunuch as well as many living in “the towns” along the coast between Azotus and Caesarea (8:40). There in Caesarea, Philip settled down and became the faithful leader and eventually the patriarch of that city’s Christian church (21:8).

**I John 4:7-21.** Whether the author of the First Epistle of John is also the author of the Gospel of John, we do not know. But the similarity in both the thinking and the use of words between I John 4:7-21 and John 15:1-8 is striking.

The author of I John gives us the clearest and most simple definition of God that appears in the Bible. “God is love” (4:16), he writes. This entire passage is built around the identification of love as the essential characteristic both of God and of God’s people. His argument is that the very nature of God is disclosed in love. To experience God is to experience the essence of love. To embrace God is to embrace love, and thus to practice love. Love is not simply warm emotion toward another. It is not so much an emotion, as it is the intention to act in a particular way towards chosen people. It is therefore God’s concrete action in the sending of Jesus to be an “atoning sacrifice for our sins” (vs. 10). It is God in action, thus commending us to be in action as well.

John particularly lifts up the uniqueness of Jesus’ work of redemption for humanity. “God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him” (vs. 8), John writes. This is an intriguing selection of words. The Greek actually states “one and only Son”, which refers to Christ’s uniqueness; he is “one of a kind”, unlike any other “son of God”. He is not just a better man than we are; he is God’s unique son whose divine love both frees us from our sin and frees us to love with Godly love.

“God is love,” John writes, “and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them” (vs. 16). Here John picks up the “abiding” theme of John 15. As Jesus is “rooted” in God, so are we “rooted” in Jesus. We, as Jesus’ “branches”, remain vital in our acting out of our faith and love only as we remain in an intimate relationship with him. We remain in a permanent and steadfast relationship with him. And therefore, the Christian community becomes a continuing reflection of the love of God. All that many people will ever know about Jesus is what they see lived out in our lives, in our actions in the world, and in our life together as God’s people.

But John does not allow the discussion to remain purely on a reflective level. He drives home the fact that the love of God is not so much emotion as it is action. And so it must be for us as well. “Those who say ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers and sisters are liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen” (vs. 20). God’s love, lived out in us, is only manifested in an intense commitment to calling forth the best in others – even those we don’t like very much. True love is action, not emotion nor preference. It is willing to love; it is choosing to embrace rather than to reject.

Thus, John ends, not with theology or even with a devotional thought, but with a command to Christians. “The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also” (vs. 21). Don’t talk about God’s love or theologize or even rhapsodize on it. Do it! And then we will know that you truly belong to God!

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