

One of the most interesting things about being in isolation is the dichotomy of beauty and tragedy. There are many people all around the world infected by the corona virus, but spring has come bursting forth with full force. I think this is God’s reminder that new life is still among us even in the face of death.

We need this beautiful reminder from God, that God is still working for good even during tragedy. The amazing thing about Jesus Christ is that he used everyday materials to share about what our relationship with God should look like. This powerful metaphor that Jesus shared about the vine, took a symbol from the Old Testament, linked it to the New Testament and applied it to our lives today.

Throughout this sermon series on the “I am” saying of Jesus, we have learned about who Jesus Christ is. Christ is the “I AM” the one who frees us from our bondage. Christ is the “bread of life,” his body sacrificed to cover our sins. Christ is the “light of the world” who created us and invites us to bear light to those who are in darkness. Christ is the “Good Shepherd” who restores our souls, and leads us to life. Today we focus on the saying: “I am the true vine” from John 15.

Jesus knew that the vine already had significance in the life of his audience. In the book “The God We Can Know,” Rob Fuquay shares that the “grapevine came to symbolize the nation of Israel much like an eagle symbolized America.”ⁱ For the Israelites in the Old Testament, the vine was a symbol of life. One of the first things that Moses did after the flood was to plant a vineyard.ⁱⁱ

God referred to the Israelites as a vine in Isaiah 5:7. Grapevines thrived in the arid climate and provided much of the community’s sustenance. Vineyards also provided food for the poor who were allowed to pick behind the harvesters. Grapevines provided deep meaning for the Israelites and Jesus’ current audience.

Jesus took an already well-known symbol and from it created a whole new meaning of who God is and who we are. In John 15, Jesus describes our human condition: we are not the owner of the vine, God is. We are not the vine, Jesus is. We are not even the fruit. We are the branches.

Look at this bunch of grapes. The branches are the smallest part and are even hard to see, and yet, this is our identity. When we look at these grapes our eyes automatically go to the fruit: how beautiful it is. That is what we want to be. This is what the world tells us we should be. This is how we measure our success by the things we produce, but God teaches us that our entrance to the kingdom of God cannot be bought or earned; our entrance to the kingdom of God requires surrender.

Surrender is a hard concept. We are wired to fight or run away, but not to stay in one place and surrender. And yet, this is the life that God calls us to lead. God whispers to us, “You are not made to be fruit...you are made to be branches that abide in me.”

God tells us we don't get to be the flashy fruit that turns into wine and sustenance. We are the branches, the intermediary between the vine and the fruit. We are called to take the life-giving power of Jesus Christ and not let it end with us. We are all branches, which reminds us that there is no hierarchy in the kingdom of God.

So, what kind of branch are you feeling like today in your spiritual life? Are you feeling strong like you can bear much fruit? Are you feeling weak like you can no longer hold up the fruit that is being borne from you? Are you in a pruning season? Do you feel that God is pruning you so you can bear more fruit? Or are you feeling like a tree that fell to the ground during a storm, that you are broken and don't even know how to be reconnected to the vine?

Church, this verse can speak to all of us, no matter where we are in this season of life and faith. Christ is the constant, the vine. We are the ever-changing branches. So, the question for us today is are we growing in our faith or are we dying?

The gardener of a vineyard is trained to prune branches that are dead; these branches take life from the vine, they do not produce fruit. Maybe you are feeling weak in your faith today, but take heart. We have to die to our sins and ourselves in order to be raised with Christ, so there is hope for all of us yet.

Vines are pruned so that they may bear more fruit. Sometimes even vines that are producing much fruit are pruned so that they can produce even more fruit.

I remember when my ministry coach came to visit me for a site visit a couple of years ago. The day after her site visit at the church, she came to my house and we went on a walk down my street. I was lamenting that the branches had been cut off a beautiful large tree in my neighbor’s yard. There the proud tree stood, but it looked so sad, unable to live into its full potential. She asked me: “Why are you upset? The branches will grow back even more beautiful.” I did not believe her.

In this season of my life I felt empty and was unable to see the promise of new life in its initial stages right there in front of me. Have you ever entered into a season in your life where you are unable to see how God was at work? I think it is easy for us to go to these places during this season of life. We wonder where is God? But God is working in us and through us.

This is why we bury the “Alleluia.” We bury it because in its burial we recognize that Christ died for our sins and was buried. We realize that we must die to sin to be resurrected with Christ. We bury this word, but all throughout the season of Lent, it has been right here...a sign of new life in the making.

Each week the letters within it rise a little more, showing us that new life is right around the corner. Do you see it? Do you believe it? This is the build up to Easter, the retelling of the story of how Christ died for our sins so that we could have hope, be free, be alive, and be full.

My coach and friend Lynne was right about the tree that had made me so sad to look at. That fall the tree was even more beautiful than before. Perhaps you are going through a season in your life where you feel like you are really close to God and yet you keep experiencing blow after blow. When difficult things happen in our lives, we have a choice, to die on the vine or to cling to the vine.

My hope for all of us today is that even in the darkest times in life, we may look towards Christ as our hope and cling on for dear life. This is how we remain or abide in Christ. Abiding in Christ takes work.

Just as it takes time to produce fruit, it takes us time to understand God the gardener; to work within the ecosystem of the vine; to recognize that we are not the only branches.

We come to more deeply understand who God is and what God is calling us to do when we go through a season of pruning. Now I know pruning sounds scary, but it is necessary for all of us to take a hard look in our lives to see what we need to let God prune so that we can have life. What are the areas of your spiritual life that need pruning?

Perhaps it is fear or surrender. Maybe you feel disconnect from God since you have been unable to worship in the ways you have before.

We all have areas of our lives that need to be pruned, but we are in this together. We still part of the body of Christ through our faith in Jesus, even when we are unable to physically be together.

That is what is so beautiful about the grapevine imagery today. “The New Interpreter’s Biblical Commentary” tells us that vineyards are tended by generations of families.ⁱⁱⁱ Fruit that is borne does not happen because of one particular gardener, but because many different people took the time to tend to the vines, to prune the branches, to invest in the fruit. We are a part of God’s vineyard and we are charged to take good care of it so that generations to come will continue to bear fruit for the glory of God.

How are you abiding in Christ? How are you surrendering this season of Lent and building into the lives of others?

The good news for all of us today is through our faith in Jesus Christ we are connected to the source of life as the branches are connected to the vine.

When Jesus sent out the disciples two by two to do the work of God he said, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few...” (Luke 10:2). May we all be excited and encouraged to be part of God’s vineyard here on earth, and may we be intentional in encouraging those around us who are unwilling or unable to accept God’s gift of life. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ “The God We Can Know” by Rob Fuquay. Upper Room Books: Nashville, TN, p. 73.

ⁱⁱ Genesis: 9:20.

ⁱⁱⁱ The New Interpreter’s Biblical Commentary. P. 782.