

At our first house, I spent a lot of time working on the flowerbed in the front yard. Each Friday, my day off, I would go outside and spend some time weeding. This practice made me feel accomplished, it was cathartic, and it made the yard look beautiful. The next Friday I ventured out to the flowerbed again only to find...more weeds. Why did these weeds keep coming back? How was it possible? Had I not pulled up the roots? Has this ever happened to you?

I quickly learned that gardening was not my gift. Today we celebrate that our God is the Master Gardener, the one who prunes the sins in our lives and covers us with grace. As we approach the celebration of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit, we are invited to continue to allow God to prune our spiritual lives; the things that choke our joy and leave us feeling spiritually dead. In John 15, Jesus Christ speaks to us about how to combat the sin in our lives and how we can choose to have new life.

Jesus knew we would need help with our spiritual lives. In this Scripture from John 15 Christ was giving the disciples the tools they would need to survive and thrive after his resurrection.

Just as God provided for the Israelites, Jesus was trying to show the disciples they had everything they needed to continue their ministry. In the Old Testament Scripture from Exodus, we see that God gave the Israelites the exact amount of food they needed to survive. If they took any more manna than they needed it would rot.

The Israelites had a hard time trusting in God’s provision. Every sixth day God would give them a double portion of manna so they would rest on the sabbath. And yet, some Israelites would go out looking for manna on their sabbath day. They had enough to survive, but fear led them to keep looking. God made bread rain down from the sky and this sustenance kept the Israelites alive for 40 years. God even instructed the Israelites to keep some of the manna so that they could remember that God provided for them and saved them.

Like God, Jesus used everyday materials to show how God sustains us. 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. 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.”<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> 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 could 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.

The branches are often the smallest part of the plant and are even hard to see, and yet, this is our identity. Usually, we are distracted by 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. We must abide in God.

Yes, we should all strive to produce fruit, but our identity is not in our successes, our identity lies in Christ and because of this fact, we all have innate worth as children of God.

Surrender is a hard concept. We are wired for fight or flight, 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 vine that has fallen to the ground, a vine that has not been cared for?

Church, this verse can speak to all of us, no matter where we are in the season of life and faith. Christ is the constant, the vine. We are the ever-changing branches. 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 weary in your faith today but take heart. We must die to our sins and ourselves 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. Part of my coaching package included her coming to the church to experience the many facets of ministry so that she could more clearly give me wisdom and discernment in my ministry. 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. Have you ever entered a season in your life where you are unable to see how God was at work?

My coach 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 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 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? What are the things that are keeping you from bearing fruit?

We begin abiding in Christ when we share our stories. The Israelites had a shared story, they had a hard time trusting in God even though God proved to them that they would be taken care of. We also have a hard time abiding in Christ. Especially in seasons of transition, our faith can waver.

When we share our stories with one another, our failures and our fears, God uses us as a channel of God’s grace. When we share, we open the door to hear others’ stories, and these testimonies are powerful...more powerful than anything I have to say on a Sunday morning.

We all have a story. We are all a part of God’s story. 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.<sup>3</sup> Fruit that is borne does not happen because of one 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? Perhaps God is leading you to take action: to join a Bible study, to pray each morning and evening, or to share with a friend or family member. We all struggle with abiding in Christ, but we must name that and be there to encourage and support one another.

**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.**

Through taking part in communion today we are called to recount the story of God’s provision and salvation. Through the bread we see how God rained down manna from heaven and led the Israelites to new life. We see Christ’s body broken so that we could live. Through the grape juice we taste God’s sustaining grace through creation. We see Christ’s blood poured out for us. Through communion today you are invited to abide in Christ. 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

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<sup>1</sup> “The God We Can Know” by Rob Fuquay. Upper Room Books: Nashville, TN, p. 73.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis: 9:20

<sup>3</sup> The New Interpreter’s Biblical Commentary. P. 782.