

John 15:1-8

Today we have a hard lesson...a mirror to look at and measure ourselves by...no easy task! Jesus was never easy!

Like the good shepherd in last week's text, this week's image of the vine is another metaphor which borrows again from the Old Testament imagery for Israel.

Readers of John's gospel will immediately recognize the "I AM" linking this image with other images that John used for the identity and mission of Jesus:

I AM bread of life; I AM the light of the world; I AM the good shepherd; I AM the resurrection and the life and of course John likes his play on words... I AM is also the name for God...the great I AM! And even though John's gospel is really the gospel that sets forth what we call Christology (our way of thinking about Jesus beyond being human) John still uses familiar images that common folks would understand to make his point.

John's not writing for theologians...he is trying to directly link Jesus with God... then linking us in relationship with Jesus.

And this image of the vine is one of fruitfulness, abundance, intimacy, and love. Today's gospel emphasizes the communal and relational nature of our faith.

Now today's text is actually the first half of the passage that we will finish next week about abiding in God's love and loving one another. John is pointing out here that just as Jesus is connected and abides with God ...We are all also connected to the central vine in some way.

Jesus again uses metaphors that common folk (most of which couldn't read or write) would get. A theology degree wasn't required to understand what Jesus was saying about himself or God.

The issue was never one of understanding...it was more about the risks involved with actually believing this guy...the problem is that Jesus' perspective often clashes with the way we see the world...and that can be a real issue for us both individually and culturally.

Now in a vineyard the best grapes are always closest to the central vine...that's where the nutrients in the plant are most concentrated...and here we see God as the gardener... outside of the system... pruning and caring for the plant... and we see Jesus physically in our world as the central vine which when healthy and in communion with its branches will produce the finest grapes.

The overwhelming trajectory of the passage is fruitfulness. The words "bear fruit" appears six times in eight verses. Fruit-bearing is not something that the branches do by force of will. The fruit happens organically because the vine is true and the gardener is good.

But the branches of this passage must abide and be attached to the central vine in order to grow and produce fruit in the first place...that's where things get hard.

Abiding is an important idea in John's gospel, where love of God means mutual indwelling...all healthy relationships are founded in the mutual interdependence of its members... be it two partners, a family, a community, a church, or even a country.

If they are not connected to a healthy "source" then they all will eventually die out.

The branches have to abide in the vine, because without the vine, they are fruitless; they can do nothing but wither...there are some nutrients there but it won't last long when severed from the main branch.

The vine was a common image used in the Hebrew Bible to speak about Israel as God's people and conveyed this ideas of being either connected to God or not...divine love vs divine judgment.

John plays masterfully with the symbolism here. The vine grower is still God but now the vine is no longer Israel...now that vine is Jesus.

And we are the branches that are now part of that vine...And the secret to a productive branch is its closeness and attachment to the vine...Our relationship to Jesus and our community...expressed in this idea of abiding.

John's Gospel is the gospel of transformation...the old made new!

So you are either connected to God or you are not! There is no in between.

...and don't confuse this with being Christian or not...Abiding in God's love is being connected to the Divine Source of all Being and one another in love...and next week (later in this passage Jesus defines that love as self-sacrificing), The Greek word agape!

To choose the greater good...God's good...and when given a choice...those abiding in Jesus will always choose the other (the whole) over the self.

So what does this mean for us...the church! How many of our buildings are decaying and falling down? Are we connected to our communities in love?

See only our attachment to Jesus' and his teachings...as lived out in our community will ensure that a church produces fruits.

Apart from this there is really nothing else. And whatever we may be doing won't yield fruit in the long run! Especially if the church forgets that its mission is to mirror Jesus...uncompromisingly proclaiming by actions the gospel in today's society. The church should be the intentional manifestation of the body of Christ, in motion... in the world...if not we will simply wither and die.

Yes, the words are hard but true. The church has become in many ways an institution that tries to accommodate the world rather than to transform it. It ceases to be attached to the source of life and becomes attached to the world...an organization seeking it's own self-preservation for its own sake.

In a vine, branches are almost completely indistinguishable from one another; it is impossible to determine where one branch stops and another starts. They all run together as they grow out from the central vine."

There is an absence of hierarchy in this vision of the church as the branches of a vine because they all belong to the same vine and are tended by the same grower...and God never competes with God self!

Therefore, there is no status here... everyone is equal... everyone is responsible for bearing fruit. The only condition for us is to love each other as Jesus loved us...to abide in Him and be connected in relationship with God and others.

Many of us have lost sight of this basic idea in our highly structured church organizations.

So, we can choose between John's model of the vine and the branches or we can choose the corporate model...we can choose the idea of the good shepherd as a model for leadership, or we can choose the CEO model of ministry. One way is a calling deeply rooted in God and Creation the other is a profession deeply rooted in profit and money focused solely on self-preservation no matter the cost to creation. Having the right perspective here makes all the difference in the world, literally.

Community and Relationship connected to God! We in America like to focus on the individual. Even church is looked at as something separate from everything else...we compartmentalize our lives...like Home, School and Work.

The temptation here, and in our world, is to "go it alone"...that's how we'll get by...This perspective is about surviving...not thriving...scarcity... not abundance.

We live in a society that promotes independence and making something of yourself...and oh by the way...making something of yourself is certainly subjective and is largely based on how much money you make...Sports figures or teachers what does our society value most...follow the money!

The problem is that our sense of self-worth is now equated with our own success and what we can produce ourselves...and it's up to me and my own resources to solve all of life's problems and challenges when they arise...it's no wonder most people are depressed and insecure...there's no connection...no grounding.

Folks...we live our lives apart from the vine...grounded in the world and money and not grounded in God and one another. We make choices based on me and my own... not the health and wellbeing of all...and you see where this is all headed! Nothing new here...human organizations will always come and go...and so will we!

Jesus instead points us to a reality in which everything is connected and grounded to God...a living, growing, and thriving community connected to all of creation... recognizing that we are not the thing itself... but are a part of something so much bigger.

And we are either producing fruit for the whole or we are sucking the vital nutrients from the rest of the vine and therefore must be pruned and discarded by the gardener...NOT BY THE OTHER VINES LOL!

Too many of us like to feel as if we are the gardeners and that leads to all other kinds of problems!

See the problem with Jesus isn't His teachings but rather we actually following them... and to live our life connected to God, Creation and to one another...because you are either part of the whole or you are not!

We don't like to be dependent do we...but in Jesus we are not co-dependent on a human being or an institution to give us our self-worth...that's where we generally get in trouble! No, we need the vine as much as the vine needs us to bear fruit.

In today's gospel Jesus knows what's next. Jesus is giving his disciples their final charges here. He was all about leaving his disciples with words of comfort and hope in the midst of what was to come.

And this talks to profound dependence...Profound reliance...because life is nothing without belonging... without intimacy... without relationship.

So how can you bear fruit? How can you imagine "being" beyond yourself? How can you realize your potential if you have no grounding, no sense of origin, no vision of a possibility outside of your own little world?

The bearing of fruit depends on dependence. It depends on our connection to the source. It depends on belonging and abiding in Jesus. As soon as you think you can produce anything yourself...from self-reliance, from your own efforts...from your

own sense of independence, think about it. What kind of fruit will that bare? And for how long before you run out of gas and just wither and die?

Bearing fruit in the kingdom of God has everything to do with who you are in relationship with...and that's easy for us to forget or ignore. And faith is not an individual expression of our own theological convictions... but rather deeply grounded in and arise from the communities and relationships in our lives.

No man is an island...we are dependent...from the time of our humble births connected literally and figuratively to our mother...without which we would die...we come in and go out of this world the same way to remind us...that we are all very much dependent...whether you like it or not.

...and with it the fear of bearing fruit. Because once we bear fruit, we cease to be in control. We open ourselves up...we are exposed and vulnerable. Bearing fruit is risky business. It will ultimately reveal who you are and on whom you depend.

It will show others that there is no other way but to be dependent...and that can be scary! Many think it's a weakness. Many think that being cut off is actually a good thing because it will result in me being more independent and self-actualized. To be all that you can be!

This is hard to do...living attached to something other than me, myself and I! That's why family is so important to model this idea of self-sacrifice...Now that's OK as long as everyone in the family is loving this way...otherwise it becomes co-dependency not interdependency ...big difference!

John calls us to take a hard look at our churches and ourselves...are we connected or not? Are we abiding in divine love and producing fruit or are we just sapping the life of the vine for ourselves? Next week the continuation and the command to love...and that's also the fruit!

Jesus' teachings prevent the church and us from turning inward into our own little worlds... centered on ourselves versus the needs of something much greater.

Love is both the core of the vine and that which is contained in its fruit! Are we that abiding love that pours love into the world? If not we just disguising self-love

behind our facades and institutions...you are either connected to the source of all life or you are not.

You and I have been chosen to bear the fruit of heaven...right here on earth. We are either One Holy Family...dependent and abiding in God's love for ALL...bearing God's fruit in the world...or we will just shrivel up and die like every human institution before us.

You are either connected to God or not...and you get to choose!

Amen