

John 15:1-8

Jesus said I am the true vine. Implying there is a false, or deceptive vine. Thematically, this is perhaps the idolatrous non-remnant of Israel that is torn down in illustrations in the Old Testament. Regardless, I do think it is fair to say that only One thing gives life, only one Vine gives life. Other vines might sustain you for a time in a sort of half-life. A fleeting, parasitic life of passion, comfort, distraction, or false hope, that comes to an inevitable end. And so our heads are bowed to our phones, knees bow to false gods, and our time and resources go to shiny things. But there is only One True Vine. Jesus says, "It is me." Cling to him if you want life abundant, with meaning, and everlasting.

He says his Father is the vinedresser. The vinedresser is concerned with the health of the vine, he is concerned with the resulting crop. Why raise vines that offer no grapes? But this Vine is good. It is very good - beloved even! There is not a problem with the vine. There is with some of the branches. And he will not let the branches leech off the good vine if there is no fruit. No, they will be cut off and burned, useless things – detrimental things! There is no other use for them.

Yet, did you notice this? Even the branches that do bear fruit, the vinedresser still attends to. Pruning them. Does that sound like fun? Getting bits of you cut off? "God why is this hardship in my life? Are you mad at me?" This verse reminds us that a hardship in your life is not *necessarily* a result of your sin, or necessarily a sign that God is mad at you. Maybe it's the opposite. Maybe He sees a branch bearing fruit, rejoices in it, and so prunes it for *its own good*, that more fruit may come forth.

And so we, with our limited sight, instead of despairing when hardship comes our way, instead of trying to parse out what particular sin (or good work!) has brought about this suffering...

maybe instead we simply, in every hill or valley, fruit or dry season, come once more to God in faith, trusting his work that is for our good and to keep us connected to the true Vine unto eternal life. And if that is hard to see, how he would prune those who bear fruit. May the martyrs be our example. May their fruit of faith encourage us. As they, literally were pruned and had parts of them cut off, ah!, they produced such wonderful fruit of faith, that wells up to an eternal feast of well-aged wine. Isaiah 25.

Verse three is an abrupt step out of the illustration of the vine. Jesus notes “the Word has made us clean already.” Is this the pruning force? The Word of Law that Jesus gives to exhort and condemn our sin? That cutting away, that painful cleansing? Or Is this the forgiving force, a word of Gospel forgiveness when we fear we aren’t producing enough fruit and “maybe we will be thrown into fire!” Calm your troubled heart with the Word of Jesus, that says you are clean because of His Work, not yours. His word of forgiveness and grace for all who come to him. So is this cleansing word a function of law or gospel? Why not both, right? His Word cleanses away sin, bringing about repentance, and lifts up the downtrodden with forgiving grace flowing from the heart of God that is poured out on the cross.

And so when we look at our lives and their fruit, what do we do when we see the shouting, the greed, the lust? Do these show a connection to the vine? Let his word prune you. Let it hurt, let it change you. Let it cleanse you with the forgiving Gospel – look again to the cross. And *then* perhaps, after receiving comfort in Christ, maybe then a good confession of Jesus, forgiveness toward others, humility, and care for others might show forth. What a blessing to you, first of all, and to others whom God loves and longs to see grafted in. There is His fruit, and yes it is His, not ours, because it came from him.

That is his next point, in fact, about how we can't do anything apart from him. This frees us from the silly games of tallying how much fruit we may or may not be producing, and therefore it frees us from the fear that perhaps he is mad at us for not producing enough, because again, well, the branches can't produce fruit at all – if not for the Vine they are connected to. And so is this illustration some works/righteousness that we need our quota of good works for the day or he will cut us out? Or is boasting excluded here since we can't do anything apart from the Vine, Jesus and his work? And if so, then where does the glory go? To us and our righteous works and good deeds and fruit? Or to God who is the vine who enabled the fruit to grow? Is this a matter of tallying, or is the fruit a simple reality of being in the vine? And if so, fruit will come. Focus on the vine, and the fruit will come. This illustration isn't works/righteousness, it can't be. Since the fruit can't come until after that person is in Christ, a new Creation.

I do want to spend a bit of time on one particular phrase however: “Apart from me you can do nothing.” And we think, “Well that's a little hyperbolic, Jesus.” Because we think we can do quite a whole lot without him. We need him when the cancer comes, sure (and a good oncologist first, by the way) but most of the time we are “fairly capable people.” But we need to be humble so we read this and say, “Oh ya, I need Jesus all the time.” But we really think, (and we think we are pious when we think it) “I am pretty good at tying my shoes, or brushing my teeth... I can do those apart from Jesus.” But no! That is not what Jesus says. He says “apart from me you can do nothing.” You cannot tie your shoes without him, you cannot breathe without him. Each heart beat in your chest. Each molecule of oxygen in the air. Each rotation of the earth. It is all upheld by his omnipotent power. You are nothing, nothing, if he had not called you into his painting, his creation. And to rebel against him is to say, I don't need or want the Painter around. How can that possibly end well? It would be like a branch saying they don't need the vine...

And so we cannot stand here and compare how great the fruit of one person is, and pretend it *earns* more than the other, since those silly games have lost the perspective on all things coming from God and to God.

Rather let us leave those games aside and come once more to God in faith. He has made us on his tapestry of time and space, he has worked to give us light and life. He did this, as we know and proclaim, through the Savior's death and resurrection. The Vine withers and dies, but it is the true Vine, it cannot stay dead and springs forth again. And if you are a branch connected to that true vine, how could you possibly think you stay dead too? It is unthinkable! This is our hope and joy.

And gives perspective to the whole illustration. Because being connected to the life Giver cannot help but change us and bring about goodness by his mighty work. And the rest of the illustration falls into place as well. He talks about prayer in there. Because, being connected to him, we pray according to His word, not for trucks and money, but for healing and forgiveness, courage and peace. And he grants those requests in his time. Connected to him, we glorify the Father, the Vinedresser, who is responsible for the fruit coming forth. It's his work to tend the vines and branches and, my, how his work is good! And for our good. Even if the pruning hurts, it is there to cleanse us from the bad fruit that we might even more be connected to the Savior. In Word, In Sacrament, in truth, God holds us fast to the vine. May we rest in that: His Work that is for us to bring us to himself and to make in us a new creation. Amen.