

# Lessons Learned From Grapevines

“I am the vine, and you are the branches.” John 15:5

John 15:1-11    1 John 4:7-21  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman  
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In your travels have you ever visited a grape vineyard? I went online yesterday to a website called [www.oklahomawines.org](http://www.oklahomawines.org) and was a bit surprised to learn that there were over 30 vineyards and/or wineries here in the state – a couple of which are in the Tulsa area. If you haven't ever taken a tour of a vineyard, I encourage you to do so, because it's quite fascinating.

One of the fringe benefits of having attended San Francisco Presbyterian Theological Seminary (which is actually located about 15 miles north of the Golden Gate Bridge in Marin County) was its proximity to California's beautiful Napa Valley.

During the Thanksgiving weekend of 1990 my parents came to visit me while I was attending seminary and we took a wonderful tour of the Napa Valley Wine Region (which I'm sure is certainly no better than any of the Oklahoma wine regions).

One of the most fascinating and educational elements of the tour was learning about how complex it is to grow fruit-bearing grapevines. In fact, that knowledge helped me (and will help you if you go on a vineyard tour) to gain a much better understanding of today's biblical text, with its famous line, **“I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit”** (John 15:5).

The author of the Gospel of John, who was obviously aware of the intricacies of growing grapes (as most likely were his original readers) has intertwined this agricultural imagery with more direct theological language to make some very important points about the intimate nature of the relationship between Jesus and his followers – and therefore, between God and us.

If we had lived in ancient Palestine, we would all most likely know about grapes and how they grow. But since most of us aren't grape experts, here's a bit of Botany 101.

Grapes are a very labor-intensive crop. Each year, the vines must be extensively pruned (cut back) because they grow so robustly. A new plant is not even allowed to produce fruit for the first three years so that all its nutrients can be stored in the vine. Thereafter, grapevines constantly require a great deal of tending, otherwise the vines will grow wild.

Not only that, a grapevine that is not pruned regularly will produce what's called sucker branches that are fruitless. If allowed to grow, this kind of branch will strip the fruit-bearing branches of needed water and nutrients. Without

pruning, the result is smaller, less succulent grapes that are of poor quality. The role of the vine grower, then, is extremely important because grapevines require constant care and nurturing.

Knowing all this helps us to better understand the deeper theological and spiritual meaning of the gospel writer's allegorical story of the vine and the branches.

To begin with, did you happen to notice who it is in this story that does all this pruning and tending in order for the grapevine to yield the best possible crop? It is God who is the "gardener" the "vine-grower." Jesus is actually identified as part of the plant – the central vine stock itself through which the branches are nurtured. And we, as followers of Jesus, are identified as the branches, all of which are connected to and grow out of the central vine.

All this rightly reminds us that **we are connected to something greater than ourselves. And the result of this intimate arrangement is the production of good fruit (which, among other things, can be put most simply as attitudes and acts of kindness, love and compassion).**

From a practical standpoint, then, **what does it mean for us as Christians, and as the church, to live as the branches of Christ?** What would you and I and "church" look like if we more fully embraced this image and model for our corporate life together?

Let's start with the hard part first. Again, we are told that in order to bear good fruit, pruning is always necessary. Useless branches drain the plant's strength and energy. To leave them in place serves no purpose and reduces the value of the vineyard. The vinegrower cuts away unfruitful branches, therefore, and discards them. But even productive branches are cut back to enhance future productivity.

How can we apply this part of the metaphor to our personal lives and the life of this congregation? I think it begins with an **honest evaluation of just what is productive and useful in our life, and in the life of this congregation, and what isn't.** But notice that I asked "what" not "who" is productive and useful.

**I personally do not think that this biblical text should be used in a judgmental way to try and determine if someone isn't bearing any good fruit and should therefore be cast out of our fellowship.** Unfortunately, this is how many churches throughout the ages has interpreted this passage.

**I prefer to see this act of pruning as allowing God to help us identify and cut away those things in our own personal lives, and our congregational life, that steal our strength and energy, and keep us from producing the good fruit of works of love and compassion.**

So here's one of those tough questions to reflect upon this week: **What in your life might need pruning out at this time?** What in our community and congregational life needs pruning out? In other words: **What can each of us cast aside in order to make us a more healthy, fruit-bearing individual and congregation?** This is something that the Session and each ministry team need to continually ask as well.

Going back now, let me re-ask the question: What would “church” look like if we more fully embraced this vine and branches image and model for our corporate life together? Reflecting on this, **Gail O’Day**, in her commentary on this passage (that appears in both the *New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary* and *The Women’s Bible Commentary*), offers two suggestions.

First, **the image of community that emerges from this metaphor of vine and branches is one of interrelationship, mutuality, and indwelling**. This mutuality is conveyed by the use of the verb, “**abide**,” which occurs ten times in verses 1-11, including in verse 4 that states, “Abide in me as I abide in you.”

To get the full sense of this interrelationship, it is helpful to visualize what the branches of a grapevine actually look like. In mature grape plants, like the ones I saw in the Napa Valley, branches are almost completely indistinguishable from one another. It is almost impossible to determine where one branch stops and another branch starts. All run together as they grow out of the central vine.

**What this vine image suggests about community, then, is that there are no completely free-standing, totally independent individuals, but rather branches who encircle one another.** It is similar to the old saying, “No person is an island unto themselves.”

What matters most for the author of the Gospel of John is that each individual person, and together as the church, is rooted in Christ, becoming one of many encircling branches. The vine and branches metaphor encourages us, then, as the community of faith known as College Hill Presbyterian Church, to **steadfastness in our connection to God and Christ, and in our interrelationship with one another.**

O’Day writes, “ To bear fruit – that is, to act in love – is a decidedly corporate act. It is “rooted” in Jesus’ love for the community... To live according to this model, then, the church would be a community in which its members are known for the acts of love and compassion that they do in common with all other members.”

A **second point** that O’Day makes is that **the metaphor of the vine suggests a radically non-hierarchical model for the church**. As the description of a vine and its branches suggests, no branch has pride of place. That is, no one branch can claim precedence or privilege or superiority over any other. **The only differentiation among branches is fruitfulness, and the discernment of what is fruitful falls to the gardener (God) alone, not to any of the branches.**

What are the implications of this part of the metaphor, then, in our day and age? I think it can possibly mean that **no Christian can claim superiority over any other Christian**; no congregation can claim superiority over any other congregation; no branch of Christianity can claim superiority over another denomination. To extend this even further, perhaps it also means that **no particular theological perspective (like traditional orthodoxy or evangelicalism, for example) can claim superiority over another perspective (such as more modern progressive thought), and visa versa.**

For as scripture reminds us time and time again, **our role is not to judge. Our role is to bear fruit – to love!**

Throughout the Gospel of John, there is only one measure of one's place in the faith community – to love as Jesus has loved – and all of us, great and small, ordained and laity, young and old, male and female, straight and gay, educated and uneducated, rich and poor, single or in a relationship, long-time member and new member, Anglo/Hispanic/African American/Asian American/Native American, are equally accountable to that one standard: to love as Jesus has loved us.

**The mark of a faithful, vibrant and alive community of faith, then, is how it loves.** We, as a congregation – as a grapevine-like community of faith – are called by God to bear the good fruit of works of love and compassion. And any branch coming out of that vine of Christ – you or I, this congregation, our denomination, our faith tradition, our theological perspective – **can do that only if it stays connected to, abides with and lives in the life-giving presence of God.**

So may we, as this congregation, continue to strive to be a community of faith that understands the necessity and intricacies of interrelatedness, mutuality and equality. And yes, also the need for occasional pruning. For when we are this kind of church we are living out what it means to abide in Christ, and living out Jesus' commandment to love one another as he loves us.

And in closing, let me remind you what the Gospel writer, in verse 11, goes on to say what Jesus believes is the purpose and end result of all this:

*I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.*

May we be known as a joyous, loving, fruit bearing, grapevine-like community of faith.

Amen.