

*The "I Am Sayings of Jesus"
Lenten - 2018*

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"I Am the True Vine"

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Key Texts: John 15:1-8

At our first house in Culpeper, I spent a lot of time working on the flowerbed in the front yard. Each Friday 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. During this 40-day season of Lent, God is calling all of us to take a hard look at the sin in our lives. The things, like weeds, that disconnect us from God and one another...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. I think this is why the scripture for today is sandwiched in between scripture about the coming of the Holy Spirit. Christ was trying to give the disciples tools to survive and thrive after his resurrection.

The amazing thing about Jesus Christ is that he used every day 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."¹ 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.² 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.

¹ "The God We Can Know" by Rob Fuquay. Upper Room Books: Nashville, TN, p. 73.

² Genesis: 9:20.

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 the picture on the screen. The branches are the smallest part and are even hard to see, and yet, this is our identity. When we look at this picture 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.

In our humanity, we want to feel good enough. Our identity is based off of what we accomplish. This is why people love social media like Facebook; it overflows with the fruit of our lives. All we allow others to see is our successes and very few times do we share our failures.

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. I think this is why people who have it all in the eyes of the world still have an empty void that cannot be filled. This void is made to be filled by our creator and in order to experience this type of peace in our souls, we have to surrender and abide.

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 one of the trees that fell to the ground during our recent 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 the 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 dead or asleep 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 last year for a site visit. This year I invested in a ministry coach to help me grow spiritual and as a leader. I asked my friend the Rev. Lynne Alley-Grant to be my coach since she had recently started coaching through the EpiCenter. 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 into a season in your life where you are unable to see how God was at work?

I think this season of my life was especially difficult due to all the different staff transitions we were having here at the church and I found myself being empty, unable to see the promise of new life in its initial stages right there in front of me.

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 under the pulpit...a sign of new life in the making.

Each week the letters within it rise up 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 was right about the tree that had made me so sad to look at. This 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?

For me this season of Lent, God has been doing some pruning away at my pride. God has been convicting me to be more vulnerable. I am an honest person and feel that I am always authentic, but I have not always shared my life in detail with people, especially in times that God was clearly calling me to do so. Sometimes it is easy to be quiet, and harder to share our failures, our shame, and our hurts from the past, even if we know in doing so it would help others.

So lately, God has called me to put myself out there and share my heart with my friends. To share my past experiences in ways in which are edifying to others who may be going through something similar. We cannot control the difficult things that happen in our lives, but we can control whom we can help because of them.

This season of Lent I have shared more with old friends and new friends about things God is doing in my life than I ever had before. I have sought out support, especially during this season of sickness with my husband, from friends and this church family. Something I had not been good at in the past.

Even though vulnerability is hard for me, this season has been so fruitful. God's refining fire of the Holy Spirit, has come into my heart once again and reminded me of my purpose: that I am here to give others hope and be in community. That is our purpose as Christians, to be hope bearers and encourage others as they grow in discipleship. I have not mastered the skill of surrender and abiding, but through surrendering my pride and becoming more vulnerable God has been able to use me in ways that I have not been open to before.

When we share our stories with others, especially our failures, or fears, or things that we are ashamed of, 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.³ 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.

³ The New Interpreter's Biblical Commentary. P. 782.