

“Fun in the Vineyard”

John 15:1-11

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By Larry Gaylord

For thousands of years, people have grown grapes. Viticulture is one of the oldest forms of agriculture, and over the centuries it has developed into both art and science. Jesus well knew the centrality of grapes in the society of his own time. They played a big role in everyday life, and in special occasions. In a place where fresh clean water was a rarity, grapes proved a source of liquid that could be kept preserved. It's hard for us to appreciate the miracle of the grape in a desert land centuries ago. John's gospel informs us that his very first miracle, at the wedding of Cana, was to change water into a certain grape product for the enjoyment of the celebrants at the reception. He also told parables about the workers in the vineyard. At the end of his earthly life, he shared a meal of bread and wine, and that meal became the heart of Christian worship. We don't often think of it like this, but grapes and vineyards are important in our faith.

Keen observer that he was, Jesus saw in the life of the vineyard a metaphor for the spiritual life of his followers. In this, he was drawing on the prophetic tradition, which at times spoke of Israel as the vineyard of the Lord. Here in today's passage he transfers that analogy to his own followers. He speaks of himself as the strong center, the one vine from which all branches radiate. I want to think for a moment not about the image but about the fact that anyone could conceive of himself in those terms, and that others would accept it. What does it say about him—and about them—and about us? If someone were to suggest that to us today—some human leader--we might question his or her sanity, or give a wide berth to someone who appeared to be making outrageous claims.

Yet to the followers of Jesus it seemed not at all farfetched or outlandish, and to all those generations who have understood themselves as his followers it has been entirely appropriate. They knew him, and knowing him, they felt that the statements he made rang true. He really was the representative of the Father's love. He really was the source of goodness. In some way still today, he mediates true life to us. He brings the organic blessing of abundance to us, for through the central vine come nourishment and moisture and those traits and characteristics which form our spiritual make-up—our genetic spiritual make-up.

Now, there is the image itself: the vine and its branches, with God the Father as caretaker of the vineyard. Vineyards are now to be found in places where they were not thought of before, including Illinois, Iowa, even North Dakota. The science of oenology is complicated, and requires attention to terrain, taste, tartness, and temperature, just for starters. But, for the vine itself, life is a matter of abiding. The branches don't have to struggle and strain, the buds and the fruit don't have force themselves into existence. It's just a matter of being. They don't have to be told and encouraged and warned to abide. They simply dwell. If disease or weather or insects cause damage, the branches are pruned back or removed. They are sacrificed for the sake of the whole organism. There is a parallel to our human experience. The call to abide is a call to be in and with the Lord: to trust, to receive, to be nourished. As Jesus says in a number of different ways, we are not to worry or be anxious; let not your heart be troubled—neither let it be afraid; we are to follow where he leads, not stopping to do a cost benefits analysis. In

other words, the spiritual life, in one respect, is a struggle only if we are determined NOT to be in Christ. The theologian Dallas Willard observes that we do Christian faith a disservice when we emphasize how very difficult it is, how against our true self it is, in short, what a drag it is to be a disciple. He says, what we should be saying is how hard it is not to be in relationship with God, how trying to live life apart from God is the really tough and miserable thing. It's when we turn away and fight against God that we make things really difficult on ourselves. As St. Augustine famously said, Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee. Jesus put it like this: My yoke is easy, and my burden is light, and you will find rest unto your souls. There's something right, and natural, and good, and satisfying and--dare we say it?--*easy*, about dwelling in God, and abiding in Christ..

Well, like all metaphors, this one has its limits. The fact is, abiding does not always come naturally to us, the way it does to vegetable matter. Unlike branches on a vine, we have a mind of our own. We can split off from the vine, and go our own way. But what happens when we separate from the Source and Center of our being? Yes, like a windfallen tree limb, we wither, and dry out, and lose our greenness and our creative powers. We forfeit the significance of our life's purpose, for it derives from our unity with the whole organism, and without that union it is gone.

Now, there seems a terrible finality to Jesus words here. Many a young Christian has shuddered at these words, to contemplate the prospect of getting lopped off from God, pruned back forever and in essence rejected forever, beyond all possibility of restoration. Yet this can't be the only, or even the main, interpretation of Christ's words. He is the same one who said, I came to seek and to save the lost. He told stories and parables of sheep and coins and wayward sons who had gone off on their own, and were found or welcomed by someone who cared. Here may be a word to the wise, to maintain our spiritual connection with the Creator. But Christ's very ministry is to heal and restore and to reconcile and to put back together that which is broken. The gospel to us is that no matter how many times we mess up, God's is the love that will not let us go. The father will tend the garden to be sure, but God is a loving caretaker, and is unwilling that any should be forsaken. God may teach and train us through trial, but will never finally reject. To the returning wanderer, God's arms are wide open, and there is rejoicing in heaven.

How then, do we abide in Christ? We remind ourselves as often as possible that we belong to the vine, and that the vital nutrients which produce the abundant life come only *from* him and *through* him. We stay aware of our spiritual need, and when we feel ourselves low, drying out, running on empty, we turn again to the Source for spiritual renewal. Every breath we take can be a reminder of our dependence on the true vine. Every mistake we make, every sin we commit, can actually lead us to a deeper repentance, and a fuller abiding in Christ. If there are times when we come up against our own limits, when life takes a turn we didn't want or expect—people of faith have often interpreted such challenges as God's pruning work, which may hurt for a moment but brings stronger growth in the long run.

So--what is the outcome of life-long abiding in Christ? The sweet, moist grape—which, together with its valued juice--is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. The *fruit* of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control. And, the outcome is growth, and more plants through the seed of the grape. That comes through sacrifice, as the grape in

essence dies to itself in order that others might live. We know that fruits developed their flavor as a way of attracting animals to eat the fruit—thus dispersing their seeds for a new generation. Resurrection is at the heart of *life in the vineyard*. Though the winds of life, or our own sins and errors, may pull us off the vine, the grace of God restores us, and we can start growing again.

In these times we can't miss the fact that a grapevine represents the stewardship of the land. It grows in harmony with soil, climate, sun, and rain, heat, and cold. The grower must protect it from predators, frost, and disease. To this day, vineyards in many parts of the world are family-owned, and some have been for centuries, and they are tended with a concern for future generations. This has a dimension which is now coming more and more to our consciousness, in a time of dramatic climate change, species extinction, and depletion of resources. Our faith, our abiding in Christ, must have something to do with the care of creation, this good green earth, with concern for the grapes of future generations, so they too may know the joy and calling of faithful service to God.

At the end, Jesus makes explicit the motive for his teaching. "I have said these things that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." He wants us to know fulfillment and abundance and joy. He wants us to have the same fulfilling relationship with the Father that he himself has. As the old Westminster catechism declares, Man's chief end—the purpose for our existence, is to glorify God and enjoy God forever. As we abide in God, as we keep the commandments—especially the commandment to love one another, we remain connected to Christ the vine, and the Spirit continually refreshes us.

Let us pray:

Teach us to rest in you Lord, to trust your sufficient grace, to grow as we stay connected to the Vine, and to know your joy; we ask in your name. Amen.