

## ***APART FROM ME YOU CAN DO NOTHING***

Sometimes when people discover that I am a minister they feel the need to apologize for not attending church. And they do so in an interesting way because they usually give me a reason that sounds like an excuse – like they know it's lame but it's the best they can come up with. Often they will begin by reassuring me that they believe in God – they may even tell me that they follow Jesus – that they consider themselves to be Christian – just not church-goers. They say that they experience God in nature, on their own.

It all sounds lovely – restful in a way that sometimes our corporate worship fails to achieve. It is like some hymns and praise songs that leave me a bit cold. Ones with lyrics about how Jesus walks and talks with someone and shares a joy that no one else can experience, or ones with “I” as the predominant word – these are what I call “the me and Jesus” songs – songs that perpetuate the image of Christian faith as totally personal and private and individualistic.

One author I read this week summed the error of this attitude saying, “Christianity isn't about me and Jesus under a blanket with a flashlight.” The Christian faith may have a personal element, but it is never private – never disconnected from the world or the body or the vine. We are all in this thing together.

And that's what our lessons this week all seem to tell us... whether it's Philip responding to a unique opportunity to share good news with another, the Psalmist from our Call to Worship proclaiming the news of God's saving acts with the rest of the faith community, the author of 1 John reminding us that love is a verb, and a sacred duty to one another, just as God has loved us, or Jesus' metaphor of Christian community as a vine – a living, organic system with Christ at the center, whose component branches receive sustenance from the vine in order to work for the good of the whole.

The allegory of the grapevine and the branches picturesquely stretched by John, offers insight into the way the early Christian community saw the redemptive relationship between God, Jesus and the faithful.

Vineyards were plentiful, particularly on the rugged hills of Galilee. Next to olives, the growing of grapes for wine and raisins was the most important agricultural crop in ancient Palestine. Unlike modern vineyards with the vines growing upright in long, straight rows for mechanical picking, the vines were allowed to grow along the ground with the bunches of grapes raised on small, forked stakes. At times the vines were allowed to grow up a nearby tree providing shade from the hot sun. The solid trunk of the vine emerging from the ground grew long, tender branches on which the fruit was produced. Without those branches, newly grown each year, the vine could not produce fruit. Cut off from the root, the branches are useful only as kindling for a fire.

In this metaphor, God is described as the vine grower who cares for both the vine and the branches. Part of that caring requires rigorous pruning so that the vine continues to produce good fruit. This metaphor depicts how the disciples of Christ, sustained by provident grace, would do much to extend God's love to the world. But if the Christian community was severed from God, the source of its life, nothing spiritually productive would develop.

This is an amazing image of the Christian life and of what is supposed be like. What is true of growing grapes is true of the relationship between the Father, Son, and believing community. Just as the branch is a part of the vine and cannot live apart from the vine, so we abide or dwell

in Jesus, the true vine – and this is not individual piety but community – we are the branches, not “I am the branch.” This is no me-and-Jesus song – no solitary communing with creation and creator – this is the connected, woven, entwining of the vineyard – branches abiding in the vine so that fruit might be borne.

Hear the grace in these words: *Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.*

The image of Jesus as the vine and ourselves as branches reminds us that salvation and wholeness – all good things that we experience and produce – come not because of what we do, but because of what we are and where we are.

Even obedience to God’s law, is transformed by the image of the vine and the branches from being something that we strive to do by our own power and might and effort, to something that God produces in us when we are attached as a branch is attached to a vine.

We die spiritually – we are incapable of producing fruit when we are not attached to the vine, or when we are not connected to the roots which nourish us. When we are attached, the fruit that we produce comes to us as a gift of God.

The gardener does the work and the vine that is planted carries the sap and all its nutrition to the branches. From God, through Jesus to us – twigs tangled on the vine of life – bearing fruit for a broken world.

When there is an abundance of sunshine to fuel photosynthesis, and when there is adequate water and nutrient in the soil to be passed up the trunk and into the branches those branches thrive, and grow, and produce, and grow again. The plant and its branches don't have to force themselves to grow, they do not have to make a resolution to bring forth sweeter and more succulent fruit, nor do they need to remind themselves to be more abundant in their production. They simply need to be in the place that the gardener has prepared – the place where the conditions for growth and fruit bearing are to be found.

For us that place is in the vine that has been planted by God and which is tended by God – the vine which we call Christ. We are part of the vine of Christ. That is where we live – where we abide – where we are nurtured and held in God’s embrace.

We are able to produce abundant fruit because we abide in Jesus and Jesus abides in us – God tends us and ensures that our needs are met. To be fruitful we need to remain a part of the vine – to live in the vine.

Just as there are two primary tasks that a branch of a vine engages in, so there are two main tasks for us. First, the branch – through its twigs and leaves – receives energy from the sun to fuel growth. The leaves, by the miraculous process of photosynthesis, convert light into plant energy which helps to drive the system that produces fruit as an end result. Second, the branch – through its connections to the stem of the plant – receives moisture and nutrients from the soil, it receives the life-giving sap that ensures growth.

Granted this description lacks a some botanical depth, but in theological terms it reminds us of what we need to do as part of the living tree of life. First, we receive energy when we unfold ourselves before God and accept the light offered to us in the Word – the written word of scripture, and the living word of Jesus Christ.

We need to be exposed to the word of God, we need daily contact with the light it sheds, we need to hold the teachings in our minds and in our hearts so that we might draw from them the strength and energy we need. When we lean out to receive God's word, when we absorb God's word like the plant absorbs sunlight, then a miracle occurs in us – God's word gives us part of what we need for life and the production of life.

Second, we are in communion with the vine and through that communion we are able to produce fruit. All the light in the world, all the reading of God's word and meditation upon the gospel of Jesus, will not avail us much unless we are connected to God and supported by one another – rooted in the Lord and connected in faith.

The relationship is established by God and is maintained through prayer – through trust and worship – through willingness to receive from God – by making ourselves available to God as part of Christ's living body, the church. These things both keep us in the vine and feed us – so that we might produce fruit because apart from the vine we can do nothing.

We remain in the vine and produce fruit when we desire a relationship with God – when we are willing to obey the commandments that Jesus has given us – when we are willing to love each other and to love God – when we are willing to forgive each other and trust God to forgive us – when we are willing to be seen with the rest of the branches in the vine.

We remain a part of the vine and produce fruit when we commune with God – when we pray seeking God's guidance – when we take time to worship even if it takes us away from other activities – when we trust all that we are and all that we have to God.

Communion with God and God's church is the connection to the vine which feeds us. God planted the vine called Christ in our midst. God grafts us into that vine. God provides all that we need for growth.

The following affirmation of faith using the imagery provided by John in our reading from the gospel this morning reminds us of our history and our future...

### [Vine and Branches<sup>1</sup>](#)

We believe in God, the Root of all living, Creator of all things.

We live in Christ Jesus, God's Son, who loved all people and who makes us one in his love.

He suffered and died, and was raised to new life.

In his death and resurrection we are also raised to life that is transformed.

Christ is our Vine, and we are his branches; and without him we cannot live.

We live by the Holy Spirit, flowing through us so that we may bear fruit for God, the fruit of love.

In the Spirit we are one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world.

We trust in the one holy church, the communing of saints, the forgiveness of sin,  
the mystery of resurrection, and the grace of eternal life.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Methodist – General Board of Discipleship