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**Title:** Vine and Branch...

**Date:** April 28 & 29, 2018

**Preaching:** Randy Spleth, Senior Minister

**Scripture:** [Psalm 80](#)

**Text:** [John 15:1-8](#)

**E-mail:** [Randy Spleth](#)



Spring has finally sprung. On Tuesday, I wrote an article about how confused spring was this year: cool and rainy, with snow dusting spring flowers, and Bradford Pears just starting to bloom but Redbud trees barely showing color. In a matter of days, things changed; by the time the article showed up in your mail box, everything was blooming.

With the warmth of the end of the week and the promises of the week upcoming, it will be a full-on expression of new life in God's good creation. Isn't it beautiful?

It is within this background of spring that we come to today's lesson where Jesus says, "I'm am the vine and you are the branches." (John 15:5) It is one of the famous "I am" phrases of Jesus and was held on to by the first followers of Jesus as they tried to make sense of a Risen Savior. There were only so many stories about actual Easter encounters. So, to figure out what Easter really meant, they went back to the things that Jesus said about himself, about how he self-identified.

Last week, we looked at "I am the Good Shepherd." (John 10:14a) To follow a Risen Savior is to follow a Shepherd. Even though most of us don't know much about sheep and maybe have never even met a shepherd, this image was one which the first followers of Jesus understood. The number of sheep in Israel in biblical times was nothing short of immense, as many as 20 times sheep than people. Because of this, they understood what Jesus was saying. If Jesus is a shepherd, then they were sheep. To say, "The Lord is my shepherd, is to say, "I'm a sheep, I follow, I trust." It's is a personal statement of dependence, identity, and direction. We'll see that some of the same with today's image. Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are the branches." (John 15:5a) There is another identity statement for you. Last week you were sheep. This week, you are a branch."

Like sheep and shepherds, I'd venture to say that most of us don't know a lot about vineyards or vines, although maybe a little more than we know

about sheep. You may have visited a vineyard. Some of us drive by Daniel's Vineyard on top of the reservoir just off Carroll Road. But that's not the intimacy and connection that Jesus' statement evokes. He knew that it has a deeper meaning for his followers. Vines and vineyards readily connected with them because it was an industry that had been carefully cultivated throughout the country for centuries. It was crucial because it was a cash crop as opposed to grain, which was raised purely for consumption. In early America the essential crop was corn, but the cash crop was tobacco. It is the same sort of thing in first century Palestine. Vineyards were vital to the economy of the land.<sup>1</sup>

But it was also an image which had a rich biblical history. Isaiah portrays Israel as God's vineyard, a land and people that God loves and has gone to great lengths to plant, cultivate, and protect. Psalm 80 praises God saying, "You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land. (Psalm 80:8-9) Israel was a massive vine planted by the Lord when God brought them out of Egypt. They were given the Promised Land where they were to bear fruit. It was their national identity, as clearly as ours is a place of spacious skies and amber fields of grain.

But even though they were well planted, they didn't produce the fruit that God wanted. In Jeremiah, God says, "Yet I planted you as a choice vine, from the purest stock. How then did you turn degenerate and become a wild vine?" (Jeremiah 2:21) They failed to honor and serve God. They were disconnected, cut off from their life-giving source, uprooted in their disobedience. Israel did not bear fruit. But Hosea promised that one day God "...will heal their disloyalty; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them ... they shall flourish as a garden; they shall blossom like the vine, their fragrance shall be like the wine of Lebanon." (Hosea 14:4,7)

Knowing all of this, thinking about this after Jesus death and resurrection, the first Christians suddenly realized exactly what Jesus meant when he said: "I am the true vine." Jesus had come to heal them, to restore them, to turn away God's anger. It became an Easter text because they realized what Jesus had done for them after his death and resurrection. They understood what it is to say, "Jesus is the vine and we are the branches."

To be a branch is to be connected to Jesus. That's a logical assumption. A branch can't be a branch without a vine, even though branches can become vines. That's how a new vineyard is planted. A branch (or cane) is what's used to plant a new vine. But if you cut off a branch and expect it to bear fruit on its own without a root structure or nutrients and water — it will simply wither up and die. The vine is the source of life. It is the vine that seeks out the nourishment and pumps the minerals and water into the branches so they can grow strong and be fruitful. When Jesus says, "I'm

the vine and you are the branches”, he was saying. “I’ll feed you. I’ll nourish you. But you have to stay connected.” He understands viticulture and he says so. “Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.”

Remember, Jesus shared this metaphor just hours before he was arrested. He knew that that the disciples would desert him. Jesus knew that on Good Friday, they would be disconnected. But he knows that with the cross, they could be grafted back to him. And they would stay connected with Jesus through his word. “If you abide in me my words abide in you.”(John 15:7)

He was giving them the path to connection, the direction for graft themselves back onto the vine. Through the cross and through his words. It is how they stayed connected and it is the same for us. We are grafted to Jesus by his redemption on the cross and we stay connected through the Body of Christ, nourished by his words and teachings. The life-giving power that flows out of Jesus, our Vine, flows into us, His branches."<sup>1</sup>

It is about a relationship with Jesus. As the branch receives its nourishment from the vine, so too do we turn to Jesus for our daily nourishment and growth, discovered within a community of followers. How tragic it is that so many today see their strength as being financial security, or peer respect, or their own creative ingenuity, or a host of other things. These things may feed us for a day or even for a season, but there comes a time when they will not bring the deep nourishment that we seek. For that we need God. To be a branch Jesus says you must abide in me and my words in you. To be a branch is to be connected.

And, to be a branch is to be pruned. It will happen and it did happen to them. Jesus predicted it and they experienced it. Again, they understood the imagery. The Romans brought with them new practices when they conquered Israel. Instead of simply letting the vine trail along the ground, they discovered the importance of pruning and trellising, to cut away the dead but also to cut branches that had blossoms to get a richer, greater yield.

Pruning and canopy management play a significant role in the development of fruit and the distribution of energy and nutrients to leaves and fruit. One of the factors crucial to the development of the grape is access to light. That’s why pruning is so important: the act of pruning exposes the grapes to the light they need to grow. For some types of grapes, vintners will actually pinch the leaves off allowing the grapes to enjoy more aeration and sun and

ripen quicker. "If a vine is not pruned, the quality of the fruit goes way down," one vintner said.

Jesus knew. It is why he said this on his last night. Jesus knew the pain and suffering that was ahead of them on that evening and the next day when he died on the cross. He also knows that they would endure much when he is gone. They will be pruned and they need to know what we don't often understand. Painful and difficult experiences often lead to the greatest growth.

Do you know that? All of us have experienced things that we have considered trials. Some of you are experiencing challenges right now. You're dealing with an addiction. You're anxious about your work. You're worried about test results. You're struggling with a child, a parent, a spouse. Some of you are walking through situations so painful, so difficult that it has knocked you off center. Jesus says, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Abide in me and I will abide in you." If you do, you will not only survive the pruning, you will grow stronger. They were important words for his disciples to remember after Easter.

They are important words for all of his followers, then and now. Paul held on to them at the end of his life. While awaiting his death in Rome, he writes, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. (Romans 8:18). He is going through pruning and he describes what that pruning is. It was hardship and distress, persecution and famine, nakedness, peril, this and more. Then, he leads with this. Nothing "...in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:39c). When you are connected to Jesus as a branch to a vine when you abide in his word and he in you, nothing can cut you off.

To be a branch is to be connected, to be pruned and to be a branch is to bear fruit because Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit..." (John 15:5). Jesus was serious about this challenge. Six times in this short passage, Jesus says that those who are connected to him will bear fruit, which raises an important question that we must all answer. Are you bearing the fruit of the kingdom? How can you tell an apple tree? By the fruit it bears? How can you tell a cherry tree? By the fruit it bears? How can you tell a Christian? By the fruit they bear. It is just that simple. The fruits of the vine are not church attendance or Biblical knowledge, as important as those things are. Those are the ways to stay connected to the vine. Rather, the fruit of the vine is a loving a compassionate life. We begin to bear fruit when by abiding in Jesus and having more love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness and self-control in our daily life. (Galatians 5:22-23) Every part of our life begins to blossom with these fruits of the Spirit. We are Christ-like in our character.

But we are also Christ-like in our conduct. We “lead a life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing him as we bear fruit in every good work.” (Colossians 1:10-11) Christ-like character leads to Christ-like conduct. You bear the fruit of love into your relationships with everyone you encounter. You’re kind and gentle with all, even those who test your patience. You are able to be so because patience is one of your fruits. People around you, your family, your friends, your neighbors, your co-workers and your employer experience you and someone who is joyfully living, that you have a peaceful Spirit. You walk your talk, bearing the fruit of to those around you and it shows. People understand where you are connected, with whom you are abiding and it indicates where you get your strength and wisdom and insight. When you bear fruit, it shows. People see in you Jesus, the Good Shepherd, and the True Vine. You declare the power of Easter but the quality and character of your conduct.

Do you? Are you blossoming as a Christian? Will you bear fruit? Jesus tells us how it is possible. Stay connected in worship and study, experiencing the life-giving nourishment of Jesus as the Vine. Use your pruning to make you stronger and healthy. And then, bear fruit in everything you do because Jesus said, “I am the vine, you are the branches....My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit... (John 15:5a,8a).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://sermons.com/sermon/i-am-the-true-vine/1483614>