

*You are the branches.* .A sermon preached on  
January 17, 2016 at St. Giles' Presbyterian Church,  
Prince George, BC by Rev. Herb Hilder.

Lessons; PSALM 80:8-19  
JOHN 15:1-11

Jesus was a master in the use of figurative  
language – taking ordinary things to express  
extraordinary and eternal truths.

Most of the I AM's for example, are comparison  
images from everyday 1<sup>st</sup> c Palestine

### I AM THE TRUE VINE

Jesus' disciples would certainly have identified  
with the symbol – vines, branches, pruning and  
fruit bearing, dead branches burnt

Palestine was a vineyard country

Grapes and vines were common throughout the  
area.

Even more than that,

The disciples, Jews that they were knew the vine  
to be the symbol for Israel.

Over and again in the Old Testament, Israel is  
pictured as the vine or the vineyard of God.

This morning's reading from Psalm 80 is but one  
example -vs. 8 **vine out of Egypt** – a figurative  
description of the Israelites of the Exodus.

Over the doors of the Temple in Jerusalem the historian Josephus says were exquisitely carved grapevines, highlighted in gold leaf They were huge carvings – as big as a man says Josephus

It was not an image the disciples could miss as they passed the Temple

The image of the vine then is a familiar one to the disciples

Whether the disciples fully grasped what Jesus was saying at that point is unknown.

Perhaps not – for as chapter 14 in John tells us Jesus has told them that he is going away.

The supper in the Upper Room is over Judas has left the group

Things are happening at a very quick pace.

The disciples' world is dramatically shifting under their feet

No Jesus! No Jesus! How are we going to manage?

As Jesus leads the disciples down the narrow street from the Upper City to the Valley Gate, I wonder if he took a grape vine that was overhanging in the street and made his statement – I AM THE VINE

I wonder if Jesus senses the disciples' anxiety and worry about what was going to happen now

I wonder if he realized that he had just dropped a lot of information about his going away  
 I wonder, as they walked the darkened streets to the Valley Gate, Jesus could both sense and see in the disciples faces a rising anxiety, fear and panic.  
 After all,  
 He had told them he was going away, but that His work was to continue and it is to continue through them and their lives!  
 I wonder....

This morning, we are 2,000 years removed in both time and space from that night  
 Yet, we know among other things that God's work continues and is very much open-ended.  
 We know that God's work, done in God's way, shall not lack God's provision.  
 We know that we do not choose God, but that our actions are a response to God's action first.  
 We know that bearing fruit as a Christian – a follower of Jesus, pilgrim and sojourner on the way is not about being so laid back, we're on the floor.  
 Resting in, trusting in the Lord is not about being passive and disengaged.  
 Rather it is about choice – making the Lord to be the front and centre of the whole of our lives.  
 Bearing fruit says Jesus – **fruit that will last**  
 As to specific bearing fruit – good place to begin is St. Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit – **love,**

**joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.**

We know that living in the light of the Lord, doing His work is about practicing the ways of Jesus daily – even if we don't feel like it and we are dealing with very difficult people

Now, Jesus never expected his first followers to continue in his teaching in their own strength.

The same is true of us.

We are not expected to do the stuff Jesus asks us to do in our own strength, by our own wits, charm and good looks.

Because we cannot

That is not a put down – THAT IS REALITY!

Hence I believe the **I am the true vine** declaration and promise – for then and for now.

How so?

Consider the word **abide** – a word that appears 10 times in the first 11 verses of John 15.

So it is an important word that Jesus wishes to draw to our attention in this image of the vine vine-grower and branches.

Abide is not a word we commonly use today Some might dismiss it as one of those churchy, buzz words that Christians use.

Eugene Peterson's The Message uses words like "live in me", "make your home in me". Joined with me"

Good more user friendly words.

If such words help you better reflect and ponder on this I AM – fair enough.

I think The Message will be one of Eugene Peterson’s lasting contributions to the faith – for it has opened the scripture story in a new way to so many!

Let me though stay with the word from John 15 – “abide”

It is in this case a word that describes a relationship, not a physical location

It is a word that means among other things, realizing the presence of Jesus in the everyday – and not just when we are told to think holy thoughts in a sacred space.

Abide means to respond to the probing, prompting and sometimes prodding of God  
It is to depend upon the Lord in the whole of life.

Jesus does not tell us in chapter 15 of John how we are to “abide” – but the answer to that question is found in other places in scripture.

We abide in Jesus as we continue to read, reflect and inwardly digest the scriptures.  
What does this story, this verse in scripture mean to me? What does it mean to the wider church today?

The Bible is not for show or to thump people over the head.

It is there to help us remember the stories of God's people then so we can live as God's people now.

We abide in him as we continue to pray – and we are all beginners in prayer.

We abide in him as we continue to worship – individually and corporately – we praise God, we rehearse and celebrate God's saving acts in history,

We confess and receive pardon,

We hear God's word read and expounded upon and by the power of the Holy Spirit receive that word as our marching orders

Each of these things – scripture reading and study, prayer and worship are akin to the branches drawing nutrients from the roots of the vine.

Consider the word “apart”

**I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit because apart from me you can do nothing (vs, .5)**

Without depending upon Jesus and the Father, you will die spiritually.

The point Jesus is making is crystal clear – to set ourselves apart from Jesus – you are like a branch on the vine that is dying – rotting, more prone to insect and weather damage,

Because it is not drawing nutrients from the root  
 It is not having the benefit of the care of the vine-  
 grower.

For Jesus, there is no group of options –  
 choose A, B, C, D

Apart from him, *we can do nothing!*

There is a kind of finality to this is there not?

It sounds very harsh.

No loving God would cut someone off would he?

No, a loving God would not and does not  
 cut people off.

I believe however, many people cut themselves  
 off by arrogantly and painfully refusing God's  
 multiple and ongoing invitations to follow him.

To join with him,

To abide with him.

Me do!

Do by self!

It's all about me.

I can manage all by myself – I don't need help

To such people, I would only pose this

question – how's that working for you?

Consider the work of the *vine grower*.

The growing of grapes and the tending of vines is  
 a demanding and labour intensive work

What the bulletin front picture may not fully show is that each of those branches and vines are hand tied for the best yield

Weeding is ongoing,

As is pruning for best yield and to keep insect damage to a minimum.

In many cases, harvesting of the grapes is still done by hand – for grapes are a fragile fruit. A lot of work then, much of it back-breaking, precise and repetitive.

But all of it necessary if the fruit is to stand a good chance of being beautiful and tasty.

Is not the vine grower a good analogy for God the Father?

For like the vine grower – God is patient, loving, caring, never misses a detail.

How often like a vine grower secures a branch against weather damage does God secure us in the storms of life?

Make sure that we will not be completely destroyed.

How often like branches needing training and pruning, has God's hand been present correcting, bringing back.

Easy to do – no – pruning and tying back has to be done carefully or the whole branch will be destroyed and not bear fruit.

The whole area of pain and suffering is very difficult and results in so many unanswerable questions

And God does not answer why questions!

Yet how often in our lives, if we are in earnest, as we look back we have seen clearly God helping us through a difficult and painful time.

Even in pruning – how many times in your life has have you experienced a humbling?

A cutting down to size?

You know that prayer attributed to a Confederate Soldier – it still speaks to each of us today doesn't it?

#### A CONFEDERATE SOLDIER'S PRAYER

Author Unknown,

(Attributed to a battle weary C.S.A soldier near the end of the war)

**I asked God for strength, that I might achieve;  
I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to  
obey.**

**I asked for health, that I might do greater things;  
I was given infirmity, that I might do better things.**

**I asked for riches, that I might be happy;  
I was given poverty, that I might be wise.**

**I asked for power, that I might have the praise of  
men;**

**I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of  
God.**

I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life;  
 I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.  
 I got nothing that I asked for, but everything I  
 hoped for.

Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were  
 answered.

I am among all men most richly blessed.

In the whole matter of pain, suffering and  
 unfairness in this life,  
 Having to learn , or be shown the hard way  
 certain things,  
 Whatever fruit I able to yield in this life has often  
 been by moving through, growing through the  
 most difficult and painful times of my life  
 I would like to think I would have learned those  
 lessons without the pruning times – but I think  
 not – God knows each of us better than we know  
 ourselves.

God really does have our best at heart – even if  
 we may doubt this a lot of the time.

He does want us to be the people he means us to  
 be.

And how can I trust and know this to be the case?

**I am the true vine** – true for all people and for all  
 time.

It is not a complicated or “deep” I AM – actually  
 it is quite straight forward.

We may have to do a little mental stretching,  
because PG is not vine country – we don't see  
vines every day, as did the disciples and as do  
many people in certain parts of the world.  
But the work still stands doesn't it.

We have heard what Jesus said

*How then shall we live?*

*What things can we point to that give evidence that  
our choice is not only a verbal one?*