

Church as the Vineyard of God
John 15:1-11
Week 2

Opening

Ask if anyone would like to open in prayer. They can pray on their own or use the prayer printed below. It also might be a good idea to reach out to a group member prior to your meeting and ask them ahead of time if they'd be willing to open in prayer. That's a great way to encourage participation without putting anyone on the spot.

Holy God, as we study Your Word and reflect on Your Church, we pray that the power of the Spirit would be at work to connect and renew us. Give us wisdom and insight and strengthen our bonds with one another and You. In the name of our risen Lord we pray, Amen.

Depending on time constraints you may want to take a bit of extra time to check in with folks and see how they're doing. You could also wait and do this at the end of the session before closing in prayer.

Check-in question

"Symbolism exists precisely for the purpose of conveying to the imagination what the intellect is not ready for." – C.S. Lewis

What do you make of this quotation from Lewis? In general, do you find it easier to use your intellect or your imagination when reading Scripture? How might the symbols we study in this series pierce our imaginations when it comes to thinking about the Church?

Read: John 15: 1-27

**The Message translation is printed below or you can read from your own Bible

¹⁻³ *"I am the Real Vine and my Father is the Farmer. He cuts off every branch of me that doesn't bear grapes. And every branch that is grape-bearing he prunes back so it will bear even more. You are already pruned back by the message I have spoken.*

⁴ *"Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you. In the same way that a branch can't bear grapes by itself but only by being joined to the vine, you can't bear fruit unless you are joined with me.*

⁵⁻⁸ *"I am the Vine, you are the branches. When you're joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant. Separated, you can't produce a thing. Anyone who separates from me is deadwood, gathered up and thrown*

on the bonfire. But if you make yourselves at home with me and my words are at home in you, you can be sure that whatever you ask will be listened to and acted upon. This is how my Father shows who he is—when you produce grapes, when you mature as my disciples.

⁹⁻¹⁰ “I’ve loved you the way my Father has loved me. Make yourselves at home in my love. If you keep my commands, you’ll remain intimately at home in my love. That’s what I’ve done—kept my Father’s commands and made myself at home in his love.

¹¹ “I’ve told you these things for a purpose: that my joy might be your joy, and your joy wholly mature.

These verses are an allegory (a work in which the characters represent other things and symbolically express a deeper meaning). There are four actors in this little drama.

- The Father is the vinegrower (v. 1).
- Christ is the vine (v. 5).
- The disciples are branches (v. 5).
- Those who do not abide in Christ are useless branches (v. 6).

The vine imagery is familiar. The Old Testament frequently pictures Israel as a vine or vineyard, but typically these references are negative. God said, “I... planted you a noble vine, wholly a right seed. How then have you turned into the degenerate branches of a foreign vine to me?” (Jeremiah 2:21; see also Isaiah 5:7; Ezekiel 15:6; 19:10, 12).

In these Old Testament examples, Israel was the vine and was subject to judgment. In John 15, Jesus is the Vine and it is the branches (the disciples or Israel) who are subject to judgment.

Vineyards are familiar to Jesus’ disciples. People pass vineyards as they walk from place to place. Some own their own vineyard or work in a vineyard. They are able to discern fruitful branches from those that will drain the vine’s energy. They trim unfruitful branches, all the while feeling good about the surgical purpose of their work. The pruning might seem cruel, but it renews the vine’s vitality. Useless vines drain the plant’s strength. To leave them in place serves no purpose and reduces the value of the vineyard. The vinegrower cuts away unfruitful branches and, finding them unusable, burns them.

1. **Where is the church in this metaphor?**

“I am the true vine” (v. 1a). In John’s Gospel, Jesus uses “I am” (Greek: *ego eimi*) on a number of occasions:

- **“I am the bread of life”** (6:35).
- **“I am the living bread that came down from heaven”** (6:51).

- “I am the light of the world” (8:12).
- “I am the sheep’s door” (10:7).
- “I am the good shepherd” (10:11).
- “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25).
- “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (14:6).

This “I am” language hearkens back to Moses’ encounter with God at the burning bush when God identified himself to Moses as “I AM WHO I AM,” telling Moses, “You shall tell the children of Israel this: ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Exodus 3:14).

In other words, “I AM” is God, and these “I am” metaphors identify Jesus as God. This is in keeping with the opening statement of this Gospel, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (1:1).

This is the last of the “I am” metaphors in this Gospel. Like the other “I am” metaphors (bread, light, gate, shepherd, etc.), the vine metaphor is reassuring—comforting. Vines and vineyards are familiar to Jesus’ disciples, and would remind them of home.

2. Do you find comfort in this metaphor? Do you feel challenged by it?

In 15:4-7, Jesus makes it clear that our relationship with him—our abiding in him—is the key both to our fruitfulness and to our destiny. The Christian finds strength and purpose through relationship with Christ. The weak person becomes strong when grafted onto the Christ-vine, and the strong person becomes vulnerable when detached from it.

“Remain in me, and I in you” (v. 4a). These words are also addressed to the church which has a valid ministry only insofar as it is empowered by its relationship to Christ (Cousar, 315).

3. “The church only has a valid ministry only insofar as it is empowered by its relationship to Christ.”

Can you think of examples (past and present) of ways in which the Church has lost that connection to Christ or has been distracted and focused on things that are not as important?

Have you felt caught up in that at times? Describe a time when you felt (personally or within the life of the church) that you’d lost sight of what it was all about – connection to and relationship with Christ.

“As the branch can’t bear fruit by itself, unless it remains in the vine, so neither can you, unless you remain in me” (v. 4b). The church has always been tempted to look to other sources of strength – perhaps wealthy donors, political connections, or just its own ideas of self-sufficiency. As long as we are in Christ’s presence, his strength becomes ours. As soon as we turn our back on him, our strength begins to drain away.

We are tempted to believe otherwise. Our prayer life gets swallowed up in busyness. Our true values are revealed in the way that we set priorities—or allow priorities to set themselves. We know that we must pray, but prayer too easily gets lost in the rush. We hope that a quick cry for help is enough, but Jesus says, **“Remain in me.”**

4. **What would it look like, practically, to “abide” or “remain” in Christ. Read 1 Thessalonians 5: 16-18. How might this instruct us in what it means to abide in the Vine. How can the Church embody this in our life together?**

“¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

When asked to measure our fruitfulness, we look to baptisms—attendance at worship—funds raised for a new building—or other statistics. True fruitfulness, however, flows from our abiding relationship with Jesus and the Spirit whom Jesus promises (v. 26). It follows, then, that our fruit will be that which we are given, and will be specific to each disciple.

“If you remain in me, and my words remain in you, you will ask whatever you desire, and it will be done for you” (v. 7). Earlier we heard, “In the beginning was the Word” (*logos*) (1:1). Jesus is the Word of God—the one who embodies all that the Father intended to communicate to humankind. The word used in this verse, *rhemata*, has to do with spoken words. These *rhemata* (words) are Christ’s teachings, which he has embedded in his disciples’ hearts.

Verse 7 sounds very much like the **“Ask and you will receive”** passage in the Sermon on the Mount, but verse 7 establishes an important condition. It is only the person who abides in Christ who can expect to receive whatever he or she asks. We have great power, but only as we are connected to the source of power. **Such connectedness shapes our asking.** If we abide in Christ and his words abide in us, our asking will be in accord with his will. Jesus says, **“Whatever you desire,”** but the person who abides in Christ will not wish for frivolous or evil things. As we abide in Christ, our hearts will be focused on Christ’s concerns and our prayers will sound more and more like his prayers.¹

¹<https://sermonwriter.com/biblical-commentary/new-testament-john-151-8/>

5. **“Connectedness shapes our asking”**

How does the “ask and you will receive” line land with you? Is that reassuring? Frustrating? Confusing? Exciting?

As a Church that is abiding in the Vine and producing fruit, what could we ask for from the Father in this season? How might our connection to Christ help us understand what to ask for and how to trust He will provide?

(more) DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Initial Reactions

1. What from this passage confuses, inspires, or resonates with you? Perhaps hearing it read from a different translation caused you to notice a new word or phrase.
2. Were there stories or images you took away from Ryan’s sermon on Sunday that helped you better understand this part of John’s Gospel?

Diving Deeper

3. What does this passage tell us about God? What does it tell us about humanity?
4. How does John’s image of the Vine and branches help us understand what the church is and how it functions? What limits might this metaphor have?

The “so what?” Questions

5. After reading (and re-reading) this text, listening to the sermon, and discussing it with your COB, how might God be calling you to act or think differently (this can be as broad or narrow as you’d like)?

Closing

Check in if you haven’t already done so and ask for any prayer requests. Encourage group members to write down these requests and follow up as necessary.