

John 15:1-8

“I Am: the Vine”

Maundy Thursday is the day that commemorates Jesus' last meal with his disciples. On that night Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper and afterwards, washed the disciples' feet. When all of this had been accomplished, he asked his closest friends, “Do you understand what I have done for you?” Jesus wanted them to be clear of his motives because he knew that soon, he would be facing execution.

Jesus then answered his own question by pointing out that he had taken the form of a servant in washing their feet. Then he commanded them to go and do likewise. Jesus wanted to remind us ALL of who **WE** are in the grand scheme of things, framed in this act of self-giving love. The Thursday before Easter has thus become known as Maundy Thursday because the word “Maundy” is a shortened form of “mandatum”, the Latin word for “command”. Jesus' last command before his crucifixion was that we would love and serve one another.

But since we have been working our way this Lenten season through all of the “I am” statements that Jesus gave us in the Gospel of John, I had designated tonight to be the night we immerse ourselves into the words, “I am the vine.” Imagine my delight when my studies revealed that the word “prune” used in the parable we just heard is also translated as “cleanse”. And that very word comes from the same root of the Greek word that John used when he told us that Jesus washed his friends' feet. Therefore, to cleanse and to prune carry the same meaning in these two stories. Both are God's way of preparing us to share God's holiness and love one another.

It is also important to know that this is one of TWO “I am” statements that was given in the company of his disciples only, along with “I am the way, the truth and the life”. One statement was given privately to Martha. You will hear about that one on Easter morning. The others were all given to the crowds that were listening. Therefore, the words “I am the vine, you are the branches” are given very intentionally to Jesus’ disciples. You and me!

What instruction does Jesus give us when he tells us this parable? The characters in the allegory are easy to identify. The vine grower is God. It is God who made us. Each of us is from the work, the grace and the imagination of the one true God. Just as no one here can manufacture fruit, no one here can create another living, breathing being. That is left to God and God alone.

Jesus of course is the vine. Many people picture a vine as something that is running or creeping but actually, in the context of grapes, the vine is the thick stalk that connects the branches that are laden with fruit to the roots. Thus, Jesus is the only way that we are connected to the grower, the Maker. The vine sends nutrients from the soil to the branches, which of course is us. Finally, this leads to fruitful branches – our discipleship.

But Jesus is more specific because he says that he is the TRUE vine. This means that Jesus is the original – there are no other copies. Therefore, the ONLY way we can be connected to God is through Christ. To believe in Jesus as our Savior and to be in communion with him. And we know that cannot have communion with God unless we are in UNION with Jesus. Trusting, obeying and living in commitment to him.

So, as we come to the table and remember the night that Jesus shared the Holy Meal with his closest friends and then washed their feet as a sign of loving service, how does this prepare our hearts, our minds and our discipleship to follow his command? Well first, we are reminded

that, as the vine grower, God often has to prune us, to cleanse us, in order for us to bear fruit. And just as a farmer may prune seemingly healthy branches for a better end result, even good things sometimes must be cut off from our lives in order for our ministry to be more productive.

Abraham had to leave his home, to be cut off from his people, in order to be the Father of God's nation. David had to leave the simple life of shepherding and writing songs to become a warrior and a King for God and God's people. Joseph had to stand up publicly for Mary, knowing that many people would be unbelieving and turn against him. The Apostle Paul had to relinquish his status of being a member of the prestigious Pharisees in order to build a church for the Gentiles. All of these are examples of God pruning those whom God had called to service.

Many of you have heard me allude to a time of personal difficulty that I experienced in my home church – the only church I had ever known, that I had attended by myself as a child. It was THE place in the world where I always felt loved and cherished and looked up to. But at one point in my life, when I spoke the truth in love, I was not accepted by those who did not want to hear the truth. And so, for a time, I had to leave that church.

As I healed from the experience, I recognized that God was pruning me. You see, I was so comfortable in this one place. I thought the body of Christ lived there and there alone. The result was that I had unknowingly begun to worship my church more than I did my God. So, God took that church away from me.

But during this time of pruning, I grew closer to God. I understood that *God alone* had to be the foundation of my faith – not a building or a group of people. Finally, I accepted that God meant for the ministry I was being led to, to go beyond the walls of one particular building. It was *that pruning* that led to my ordination to ministry and finally, to accepting the call to be your pastor.

And just as God as the vine grower knows exactly what we need, when we need it, we cannot receive it if we do not abide in Christ. To make this point clear, Jesus uses the word “abide” ten times in seven verses. Abide is actually defined as “an inward enduring of a personal communion”. It means being closer to God through our understanding of who Jesus is and what he has done for us in his life, death and resurrection.

Do any of you remember the old Russian nesting dolls? They are a set of wooden figures which separates, top from bottom, to reveal a smaller figure of the same sort inside, which has, in turn, another figure inside of it, and so on. This is the picture that comes to my mind when I read Jesus’ words. God is the big doll and inside is Jesus and the subsequent dolls are each of us, nesting close to the Father and the Son, Abiding in Christ.

But greater communion is not guaranteed unless each of us works hard to develop and maintain our relationship with Jesus as our savior. While God gives us everything we need, through the grace of Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit, we must do our part through prayer, reading of Scripture, relationship with others in the body of Christ and obedience to the work that God calls us to.

In The Message, Eugene Peterson writes it this way: “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”. So, we are to be at home in Christ. And the way that Jesus describes this abiding life is what links **this** “I am” statement to his words after he washed the disciples’ feet. But these words are not just for us individually. They are also for us collectively, as the body of Christ on earth.

The love command that Jesus gives in the upper room with the disciples is **THE** imperative moment in Jesus Christ’s teachings that prevents each of us and all of us, as the

church, from being inward turned and self-contained. We are to cling to God through Christ in order to bear the fruits of love to each other and for each other. And we are to be obedient to Jesus' command.

Max Lucado gives a perfect illustration in the book that a couple of our Sunday School classes have been studying, Anxious for Nothing. He writes, "When a father leads his four-year-old son down a crowded street, he takes him by the hand and says, 'Hold on to me.' He doesn't say, 'Memorize the map' or 'Take your chances dodging the traffic' or 'Let's see if you can find your way home.' The good father gives the child one responsibility: 'Hold on to my hand'."

This is what Jesus means when he says, "I am the vine – abide in me." In other words, God give us EXACTLY what we need to love and serve others. But there is also an important message for us collectively. Because I believe that we are being told to abide in each other as well. We are to be the branches that bear one another up. Let me explain.

When I was growing up, my granddaddy had a grape arbor on his farm. Sometimes when we went to visit, some of the grapes would be hanging low to the ground. I loved this because it meant that I could just reach out and pull a few off and eat them, right on the spot!

But sometimes all the grapes would be up high, like Granddaddy had wound them all around the top just so I couldn't get to them. What I didn't know was that he had been "tucking" the branches before the grapes began to form. That is, to control pests and make harvesting easier, he would take low hanging branches and wind them up around branches that were closer to the guide wires. Tucking means branches that may be weaker or more vulnerable are woven in and through stronger, more stable ones. This actually protected the grapes and made them healthier and fuller.

And isn't that what we are called to do in the church? When our brother or sister is hanging low – experiencing a faith crisis, wading through financial difficulties, working hard on a marriage that is failing or dealing with illness or grief – we are to tuck the low-hanging branch closer to the sturdy ones.

The Apostle Paul tells the Romans that those of us who are strong and able in the faith need to step in and lend a hand to those who falter. (Romans 15:1) And that is exactly what Jesus tells his disciples before he goes to his death. I have fed you. I have cleansed you. I have become your servant because I love you and together, we can bring glory to God. Now, when I am gone, do this for the rest of the world.

So as we come forward and remember that meal that has become the most sacred feast of our faith, may we remember that it is God alone who made us; that in order to be fruitful servants we are to make it our aim to cling to Christ'; and that we are commanded by Jesus to serve others with the love that we have been served with. In this way, we will bear fruit for God, glorifying God as we make disciples for Christ. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.