

## Community Garden

*John 15:1-8*

### Slide: Vineyard

The San Francisco Bay area is home to some of the finest winemaking in the world. Snuggled in hills beyond the bay are the Sonoma and Napa Valleys, where the climate is perfect for vineyards. It is a Mediterranean climate, not unlike parts of Italy, France, Spain, and other regions nearby.

Jim and I lived in the Bay Area while I was in seminary and had many an opportunity to visit Napa, Sonoma, Santa Rosa and many of the Valleys there, all full of vineyards. And, if you have ever been there, you can see the ever-changing landscape based upon the season. Row after row of vines creep up and down the hills, and it's almost to the point that there isn't a place that does not don the mighty grape.

The people who live there know about wine, even if they don't drink it. They know what

it takes to make it; that at just the right moment, the branches on the vine must be carefully cut back, almost to the point of looking like a dead stick pointing out of the ground. Only a cut back branch can increase its fruit, fruit that is hoped to be twice the crop from one branch than the year before.

It's hard to believe that something that looks so dead during the winter can produce such lush, beautiful plump grapes, but they do. During the season, the branches, which looked like they could produce nothing, suddenly produce beyond what was thought possible.

But, at any moment, a frost can ruin everything. At any time, a pest can hinder the branches, and at any time, the branches may get become diseased, making for worthless branches that produce little to no fruit at all. And, as we saw last year, a devastating fire can sweep through, ruining a vineyard pretty much forever. It is a risky, costly business, producing fine wine.

**Slide: I am the true vine**

The people who heard Jesus talk about vines and branches would have understood this well. They also lived in a climate like the Mediterranean, and they would have known about the making of fine wine. Winemaking was a big business in those days, too. So, when Jesus talks about being the Vine, we being the branches, and the trimming of the branches that would be necessary to produce good wine, they would have understood the analogy well. In fact, really, any gardener would relate to this metaphor well.

**Slide: Jesus and Disciples vine**

Yet, what I don't think we understand very well is the larger context of this very well-known metaphor that Jesus uses. Last week, Pastor Nate shared his that he usually doesn't care much for the metaphor of the Good Shepherd Jesus used because today we no longer live in a culture where everyone would understand what shepherding really is and what Jesus truly

meant by the metaphor. I do know three families here at St. John's who could tell us a bit about shepherding, but that would be it. I myself know very little.

I, too, have a similar problem with these eight little verses about vines and branches that really has some fierce, almost violent language in it – cutting pruning, withering, being cast into the fire. We have to be careful here to avoid thinking that what Jesus is talking about is casting people out who don't abide in him or abide in him well enough, or don't try hard enough at a faithful life to be attached to the vine. We also have to be careful to take this metaphor too far to assume that it is about individual salvation – heaven vs. hell; that somehow it is about individual piety or a lack thereof - In other words – morality.

**Slide: I AM**

The larger context of this chapter in John's Gospel is that Jesus is talking about vines and vineyards on the night of his Betrayal. This whole section of

John's Gospel is a part of what is called Jesus' Farewell Discourse to his Disciples. This part of John takes place before Jesus is arrested and crucified. So, the disciples are noticeably distressed that Jesus is telling them that he must leave, suffer and die. In their eyes, Jesus was the promised Messiah, the one on whom all their hopes depend, and now he is saying he's leaving? How disoriented they must have been.

Jesus' response to this is to comfort them and to give them instruction about how to stay grafted to him like branches do to the vine. He is consoling them and promising them that he will not abandon them. This whole metaphor is for the sake of the disciples – which includes us. And, it's a metaphor about connection to Christ. If we abide in Jesus, we are connected, but if we don't abide, it's hard to thrive in faith especially in a world so determined to disconnect from God's good intentions.

So, do we feel connected like branches to the vine Jesus Christ? Do we as individuals feel connected to the vine Jesus

Christ? Do we as a community of faith feel connected?

### **Slide: Social Media**

Maybe the question we should be asking is the following instead – to what are we really connected? That word carries with a lot, too. In today's world, we are connected more than ever. In our modern life, we are connected to social media, to Television, to cable news, to Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and the Internet. We are more linked in than we ever were before.

And yet, studies are showing that we are more isolated than ever. We have friends on Facebook we may never see and depression and loneliness is taking off at an alarming rate. And why? Because what we are connected to is not relational. It's social but it's not actual relationship. It's not enough to nourish life. It isn't the kind of face to face or fleshy community experience that all humans need. Being truly connected to something takes time,

dedication and hard work, the hard work relationships are.

Let me tell you, my friends on Facebook know how much I love that connection of friends online, but it is not relationship. It is not true abiding, because abiding takes being actually grafted on to another. It takes work and trust and vulnerability – but it's worth the effort because of the growth and life it offers, even when risking hurt, too.

This is at the heart of Jesus "I am the True Vine" metaphor. Jesus offers his disciples more than mere connection, but real relationship – relationship with God but also with the community of believers. If you separate yourself from that community, the community that intentionally is present to nurture your faith, it will be hard for your faith to grow and it will even possibly wither and die. On the night of his death, Jesus gave his disciples church, community, relationship, and a connection to him through each other, otherwise known as the Body of Christ.

Call it a Community Garden of sorts. In this community garden, everyone gets a row to grow things, but it takes everyone else to tend it. And when the bounty is reaped, everyone gets a share in it and goes to the party together. But, with all community gardens, you can step on each other and things can sometimes go wrong, but things also can go right. Communities are not perfect, but they do have common goals and values. And, when they are connected to Christ, they thrive. And, when communities thrive, individuals better thrive within them.

### **Slide: St. John's**

Human beings desire connection that is real. Facebook isn't real connection. It just seems like it is. And, don't get me wrong. Catching up with people on Facebook and knowing what's happening in their lives is great, but it's better to have a real community where people come together like this one, dealing with the ups and downs of life together. That is the promise that Jesus

gave us, so that we may know that we may never be abandoned, but loved, valued, and have a place at the table.

The Vine is Christ. The branches are community. Perhaps that is what Jesus is giving us here in this reading from John's Gospel - a Community - and that by being connected, by abiding in him - we have relationship to one another.

Therefore, how can we be better community together so that all who come to Christ's table in this place will feel connected to the vine? How can we be a place where we admit who we are and allow others to do the same? Can we be a Community Garden of Christ, bearing fruit for the sake of the world?

These are the kinds of questions we have been asking of ourselves lately as we go about the task to continue in a vision for St. John's. If you have not already done so, please take the survey that Kathy spoke about at the beginning of the service. Not only will it help us realize

where we have been thriving as a community of faith and where we have been fruitful while connected to the vine, but it will also give us direction for the future, a future where God has plans for the growth of our relationship together.

### **Slide: Communion**

"I am the true vine," Jesus said to enable his disciples, his friends and the only community he himself experienced to abide in him. That connection is real. And it is promised to you today in the wine that comes from that vine, given and shed for you. Amen.