

“I AM”
St. Paul’s United Church of Christ
May 2, 2021

Friends in Christ, the gospel of John has several “I AM” statements of Jesus. Today, we will consider one of them, “I am the true vine.”

Most, if not all of us, are familiar with vineyards, especially since Snus Hill Winery is located just out of town to the east.

Growing grapes is a lot of work. New vines are planted and stacked up, but are not harvested for about five years. Branches are pruned back to cause the vine to grow bigger and stronger so when it is time for the vine to be ready to produce grapes, there is a strong vine with good branches. After each growing season, the branches are pruned to get the plant ready for the next year. There are many variables that affect what varieties of grapes will be grown. They include soil type, moisture, temperatures, longitude, and latitude. When we were in Latvia in 1990, our hosts showed us what they said was the northernmost vineyard in the world.

References to vines and vineyards are throughout the Old Testament as God refers to the Israelites. Water was often not good, so the people drank wine.

Susan Palo Chervien wrote in *Christian Century*: Grapes have been cultivated in the Near East for over 7,000 years, back to the Neolithic period. The oldest known winery, found at Vayots Dzor in Armenia, dates from 4,000 years ago. And the Sumerian character for life was a grape leaf.

We find in John 15 that Jesus tells his disciples the allegory that he is the true vine:

15 “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vineyard keeper. ²He removes any of my branches that don’t produce fruit, and he trims any branch that produces fruit so that it will produce even more fruit. ³You are already trimmed because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴Remain in me, and I will remain in you. A branch can’t produce fruit by itself, but must remain in the vine. Likewise, you can’t produce fruit unless you remain in me. ⁵I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, then you will produce much fruit. Without me, you can’t do anything. ⁶If you don’t remain in me, you will be like a branch that is thrown out and dries up. Those branches are gathered up, thrown into a fire, and burned. ⁷If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you. ⁸My Father is glorified when you produce much fruit and in this way prove that you are my disciples.

May God bless our hearing of his holy word!

John chapters 14-17 is known as the Final Discourse that Jesus gave to the eleven of his disciples on the night before his crucifixion. (Judas left the group to

do his deed.) The discourse is generally having three distinct components. First, Jesus tells the disciples that he will be going away to the Father and that he will send the Holy Spirit to guide the disciples. He brings peace to them and tells them to love one another.

The next part of the discourse contains the allegory of the true vine, our text for today. Then it ends with Jesus' Farewell Prayer which is also called the High Priestly Prayer.

Jesus referred to himself as the true vine and that those who follow him are its branches. This vine has an unlimited number of branches, enough for each one of us to be attached to the vine.

So we are the branches. The power of love and abundant life that flows from God into Christ flows also into the community that gathers around Christ and partakes of Christ. Who can tell exactly where the vine stops and the branches begin? To what loving energy does the community have access through this deep and abiding connection?

Through this connection to the vine of life, the community is filled with the creative, loving, and merciful energy of God, that same love that flowed through Christ. And because of this creative and loving connection, we will bear fruit. Christly fruit; godly fruit.

However, think about what happens to a branch that has been broken off. What happens to it? It withers and dies. It can never bear fruit again. It is not good for anything except firewood.

Jesus said. "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, then you will produce much fruit. Without me, you can't do anything." Jesus wants us to produce fruit. Good fruit, like kindness, generosity, and faithfulness. Most of all, he wants us to love others as he has loved us.

In the vineyard, the vine and the branches have to work together just as we have to work with God.

The branches lift their leaves up into the sunlight and into the air; the vine digs its roots deep into the earth and down into water. Nourished by the vine, by water and the earth, the leaves raise their faces to the sun and the branches produce Christly, godly fruit. They do this on behalf of the vine; it's a mutual exchange.

So the worshiping community gathered around Christ is nourished by Christ. It is the very energy of God that flows through the community. (I in them, and you in me. . . . Abide in my love.) And the branches, thus nourished, produce fruit. Fruit for the life of the world, for the ongoing becoming of the universe, and for the becoming of human community. That the Word made flesh in Christ may again be made flesh in the world.

Augustine wrote: "If branches are attached to a vine, it is not to confer any advantage on the vine; it is rather that the branches themselves may draw their

sustenance from the vine. The vine is attached to the branches to provide them with their vital nourishment, not to receive anything from them. In the same way Christ's presence in his disciples and their presence in him both profit the disciples rather than Christ. If a branch is cut off, another can grow from the life-giving root; but once severed from the root no branch can remain alive."

Gennifer Benjamin Brooks writes: "Bearing fruit means engaging for ourselves as individuals and as the church in those activities and tasks that recognize and invest in the goodness of God's love by spreading that love to the neighbor whom we are called to love. The specifics of bearing fruit are left to the community as a whole and to each individual who receives that nurture that both Christ and the community provide. Each and all must come to the realization that we are not self-made. Yes we are individuals, but as Christians the individualism so admired by the world must take a back seat to the reality that all that we are and have are the result of the abiding grace of God."

One note of caution: we can drift away from the vine, oftentimes not even realizing it. However, through his grace we can reattach ourselves with the vine.

Christ is the true grapevine. We are the branches. We are to bear fruit according to our nature, which is God's love incarnate in Christ, offered for the life of the world. The "We" can be each one of us, the church, or the community.

They will know we are Christians by our love!

Amen.