**“I am the Vine”**

**John 15:1-17**

When we purchased our house about three years ago, the backyard was a mess. The house had been abandoned in the recession and left over grown. As we pulled out the over grown trees, shrubs and flowers, we replaced some of them with an orange tree, a lime tree and a satsuma orange tree [Satsumas are like tangerines]. I remember when we put them in our friend told us that the best fruit grows when the trees are stressed. The best fruit comes when the tree is stressed.

It’s interesting to think about fruit in light of John 15. Jesus said, ***“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing”*** [John 15:5]. Jesus calls his disciples to think about the primary connection in their lives. He also calls them to think about the source of their vitality and fruit of their lives, Jesus, who calls us to know him and to have a life in him that is full and abundant.

The cultural context of Jesus’ time was very much tied to agriculture. When Jesus said, “I am the Good Shepherd.” The hearers could probably look over their shoulder and see a field, and sheep and a shepherd. So too in this agricultural world, the people wouldn’t have to look too far to find a grape vine, some branches and perhaps even some grapes. They understood the patience and timing connected to planting, pruning, and harvesting.

*Not so with us. As I am shooting this video I am standing at Concordia University* Campus in Irvine California. Not too many years ago Irvine was an agricultural oasis. Patient farmers planted rows of Strawberries, beans, corn, celery and other vegetables. They blanketed the landscape. But now, all that land has been covered over with concrete, buildings, roads, and freeways. It’s interesting to think about how time works. Strawberry fields take a while to prep, plant and harvest. Freeways lead us to think in terms of speed and movement. People drive 80 miles per hour on freeways and still can’t squeeze all the activity into life. Interesting!

Our lives are lived at the speed of a freeway. We are impatient. We are over busy. We are connected to a way of life that wears us out and in some cases makes us sick. Somehow we have bought into the myth that the abundance of our lives is reflected in the sheer amount of activities that we participate in. So too have we propagated that understanding to the next generation. So many times I hear parents on the sidewalk at school talk about how tired and stressed out their children are because of the weekend events. Are we connected to the right things? Are we connected to a life style that bears fruit rather than anxiety and stress? How does the Lord Jesus speak into our busy lives? Let’s take a look at John 15.

Jesus begins his message with a simple paragraph declaring what is. Jesus ***is*** the vine and his Father ***is*** the gardener. It is the gardener who prunes and cuts the branches that are in Jesus. But why prune? As every farmer knows, fruit trees and grape vines, and even flowers and shrubs, require strategic snips. Every year they look for limbs and branches that don’t bear fruit. This kind of useless “growth” takes away energy from the true purpose of the plant. This unproductive growth is hurtful, not helpful. God, the gardener, prunes so that we will be more fruitful. In our world of breakneck speed and a pace that kills, it’s interesting that God shapes us through pruning and trimming. Perhaps those moments when we are cut back through adversity, and we can’t keep up with what we think we should be doing, that God calls us back to our connection to Jesus and the vine. Perhaps in a culture so focused on our own abilities and strength, it is only when we are slowed by an illness, a broken relationship, a bankruptcy, a time of unemployment, a time when work is miserable, that we truly see our need to be connected to Jesus. He is the vine and we are branches. What a radical claim. I wonder what life would look like if we relied on our connection to Jesus and not our own strength. Would it change everything? I wonder how much more strength we could find in difficulty. It’s an interesting thought.

In verses 5-8 Jesus brings his comments into focus. He is the vine and we are branches. There is no life outside of being in him. Life is found only in him.

So let’s stop for a minute and think about the setting of this viticulture dialogue. This whole conversation is part of Jesus’ farewell discourse. It is a continuation of the conversation you learned about last session. Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life giving vine for the branches. Jesus’ departure is imminent. His arrest and crucifixion is less than 24 hours away. Knowing just how unsettling this will be for them, Jesus is comforting and encouraging the disciples. In time of trouble, it is a comfort to hold in our hearts that the primary connection in our lives is to God. Jesus cemented that connection when he suffered and died. He himself, like a seed, was buried in the ground. And he himself is the “first fruits” of all the living, in that he rose up from the dead. We are connected to Jesus, grafted in through our baptism into Christ. [Romans 6] When you wind back through the branches and weeds of your life, you find your connection back to a life giving vine. Back to Jesus. He is the vine and we are branches. We abide in him and him in us. So many times, just like those first disciples, we need to be reminded of that.

Weekly worship makes a huge difference in that regard. For many families that time together in worship is the only time they get to relax, meditate on Scripture, and be with people who share their savior and their value system. It’s the one place in the whole world, and in our whole lives, that we are poured into. It’s in this setting that the vine feeds the branches. Christ affirms his connection to his people. I always like the little ditty that says, “Seven days without Jesus makes one weak.”

Continuing his address, Jesus’ gentle and reassuring words in verses 9-17 are spoken to people he dearly loves. He talks about what it means to love. God loves His son and because the disciples are branches in Jesus, the vine, so they too are loved by God. But also, Jesus is our example of God’s love. “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you,” he says. But how is this love exemplified? God loved the world enough to send his Son to die for the world. There is no greater love. And Jesus makes it abundantly clear, to his disciples then and now; as Jesus has loved us so we are called to love one another. He speaks in terms of love and relating to people. Because God loved us, so we love each other. He affirms the connection that he has to his disciples and they have to him. I remember a story about a northerner who went into a southern diner and was asked about what these things called grits were. The waitress said, “Well grits is grits honey.” The man asked, “Well what’s grit.” She said, “I don’t know.” There is not just grit. There are grits. Grits live together. Grits stick together. Grits live in community. And so do Christians.

Love each other is the command of Jesus. Having been set in community we are commanded to love each other. Christians don’t live as one Christian all alone – like a grit. Christians are called to community – like grits that stick together. Just as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit have Trinitarian community, Jesus promises this community extends to us as well.

Now we come back to where we started. My friend said to me when we planted the orange tree, lime tree and a satsuma tree that, “these trees bear better fruit when they are stressed.” I have thought about that a lot lately. In my own life it’s been a time of rethinking, reframing and moving into a different season. Our children are for the most part raised and we are empty nesters. It’s a time of churching and figuring out what things look like. No doubt it’s a good time, but it’s a stressful time.

How does the Lord Jesus bear fruit in you through anxious moments? Is the fruit he’s growing in us sweeter because he brings us through tough circumstances? When we are stressed do we see Jesus as our sufficiency…as our vine?

The fruit Jesus grows isn’t measured on a scale in a grocery store, nor is it sold in a stand by a road side; rather it is grown in the soil of our lives, and refined through difficulty and pruning of the gardener. Galatians 5:22-25, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.” What is growing in your life? Anxiety, worry, fear, greed?

Perhaps it’s time for some pruning and refining of what we do. Perhaps it’s time to look back and find our primary connection. Perhaps it’s time to adjust our lifestyle to what God would have us do, rather than be that plant that takes up a whole corner of the yard and produces no fruit and needs pruning.

God has chosen you, put you into your own unique context of life, and called you to love people around you. It would be very good if you talked about how to love one another and the effect of that love on the people around you. It would be good to spend some time together in prayer for those who are being pruned, those who are lost and those who are tracking strong.

Perhaps you could even commit to memory John 15:5, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” God bless you and keep you connected to him and one another in Jesus…He is the true vine.