

“I Am His and He is Mine”

John 15:1-8, Easter 5-B, May 3, 2015

Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus speaks to us seven “I AM” statements to undeniably support his claim that he is the eternally-begotten Son of God; for no mere human being could ever possess the immense power that Jesus claims to possess for himself.

Once again, we are in the Upper Room with Jesus and his disciples in Jerusalem on the night before he is crucified, though some Bible scholars suggest that by this time Jesus and his disciples had actually left that sacred place, for the last verse of chapter 14 tells us that Jesus said to his disciples: “Arise, let us be going!” (v. 31)

It is quite possible that as Jesus and his disciples were making their way to the Garden of Gethsemane that they passed by the city walls of Jerusalem, where there were enormous grapevines growing in abundance. Perhaps these vine had just been pruned and trimmed earlier that day, and here there were severed branches laying on the ground that had surely wilted by this time in the heat of the afternoon sun. So Jesus picks one up and shows it to his disciples as he begins to speak these words.

Of course, when Jesus spoke about vineyards, the people of Judea knew what he was talking about. It was an industry that had been carefully cultivated throughout the country for centuries.

Do you know that a young vine is not permitted to bear fruit for the first three years? It is, therefore, drastically pruned in December and January to preserve its energy. The particular branches that do not bear fruit are cut out to conserve the energy of the plant. If this constant cutting back was not done, the result would be a crop that was not up to its fullest potential.

But there is also something else that you should know: Over and over again in the Old Testament, Israel is pictured as the vine or the vineyard of God. Isaiah the prophet pictured Israel as the vineyard of God. He said: “*The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel*” (Isaiah 5:7). In Jeremiah, we read God referring to his chosen people in this way: “*I planted you as a choice vine*” (Jeremiah 2:21). Hosea spoke a word of judgement when he said: “*Israel has become an empty vine!*” (Hosea 10:1) In Psalm 80:8, we read that God compares “*Israel to a vine that came out of Egypt.*” Josephus, the Roman historian, informs us that over the Temple in Jerusalem was carved an exquisite, gold leaf grapevine. It stood as a symbol of national unity. Israel itself was, in the eyes of its people, the true vine, whose roots ran all the way back to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

In Jesus analogy, he likened himself to a vine, while the fruit bearing branches here are the disciples. God the farmer is depicted as the one who cultivates the vineyard. He waters and tends the soil, so that the vine is properly nourished. He takes pride in his crop. But this means that he also prunes the vines and removes the dead wood. The grapes hang on to the branches. What Jesus is saying is clear. The disciples should receive their strength from Jesus. He is the true vine. If they break away from him, they will be like unproductive branches and die and bear no fruit. They then will have to be pruned out.

What can we make of this analogy in terms of our daily life? What does it mean to be God’s vineyard?

1. First, I think that it raises a question that we must all answer: Are we bearing fruit for the Kingdom of God.

How can you tell a pear tree? By the fruit that it bears. How can you tell an apple tree? By the fruit that it bears. How can you tell a Christian? Now this question is a bit trickier for only God can look into the heart to see if true faith is abiding there or not, and some Christians have not progressed all that far down the road of sanctification. Nevertheless Jesus indicates that fruit should be apparent in the Christian’s life that should also be a source that brings love, Christ’s own love, to bear upon the lives of other people all around them!

2. Secondly, the saying says to us that there is such a thing as an unproductive life. In Jesus analogy, the farmer (God) is depicted as pruning out bad branches. We don't like to wrestle with that concept, because it implies that God cuts some people out. There is an element of judgement in it that we would just as soon not deal with. There are those who are quick to point out that Jesus was here specifically referring to the Jews. That is true. But we miss the point if we do not understand that this law of nature also applies to Christians.

Dead branches are not only non-productive, they pull the energy away from the vine and keep it from fruit bearing new branches. We like to think that there are various degrees of allegiance, but the truth is that in God's vineyard there are only two kinds of branches those that bring forth fruit, and those that do not. The former are cultivated, the latter are pruned. God blesses the lives of those persons who are productive for his Kingdom.

3. Third, we must cultivate a meaningful relationship with Jesus Christ. Jesus said: You must abide in me and my words in you. He is talking here about a relationship. As the fruit receives its nourishment from the vine, so too do we turn to Christ for our daily nourishment and growth.

How tragic it is that so many today see their strength as being financial security, or peer respect, or their own creative ingenuity, or a host of other things. These things may feed us for a day or even for a season, but there comes a time when they will not bring the deep nourishment that we seek. For that we need God.

When Jesus cautions us against being unproductive he is not trying to frighten us so much as he is to caution us on the importance of our remaining connected to him through our ongoing faithful communion with him and his Church. Already in the early church we know that this was a problem. In Hebrews 10:25 the writer says: *"Let us not forsake the assembling of ourselves together as some have done, but come together to encourage one another in a life of good works; and all the more so now that we can see the Day is drawing near!"*

I know that I have made the analogy before, about the surgeon general's warning on the side of a pack of cigarettes, or the surgeon general's warning on the side of a bottle of wine. Cigarettes: This product has been proven to be hazardous to your health and may contribute to cancer and heart disease. Wine: Studies have shown that pregnant women may increase their change of birth defects through the consumption of alcoholic beverages.

Last Sunday Lisa and I were sitting in the family room when those ominous warnings of tornado watches came on our television screen. Then the warning of an actual tornado warning came on our screen, indicating that a tornado had actually been sighted.

Lisa called me and her mom into the hall way where we sat for a while and fortunately no tornado came our way. This reminded me of the last time that I had had a close call with a tornado down in Statesboro, Georgia, 30 years ago, when I was 30 years old, serving St. Paul Lutheran Church there. I had ignored the tornado watches, and the warning. And then when the power went out in the church and I could no longer work on my computer, I was headed for my car, when I opened the front door of the church and heard the proverbial freight train coming down the tracks and I knew there was nothing I could do to escape it.

That's when I went into the men's restroom and sat down on the floor and began to pray in a fashion like this: "Gracious Lord, you know that there are not very many Lutheran pastors in this part of the country!"

God did spare my life, though there were 40 large pine trees that came down in the church yard!

"I am the Vine you are the branches and my Father is the Vinedresser! Abide in my and let my Word abide in you and you will bear much fruit, but apart from me you can do nothing!"

In closing, I thought I might share with you that first verse of a great hymn that many of us love so well:

“Chief of sinners though I be, Jesus shed his blood for me;
Died that I might live on high; lives that I might never die!
As the branch is to the vine, I am his and he is mine!”

May God enable us always to bear fruit as we extended the reaches of his glorious kingdom to more and more people all around us, day by day! Amen