

# ST. MATTHEW'S CHURCH

## NEW YORK CITY

### THE VINE AND THE BRANCHES

**John 15:1-8**

**Sixth Sunday of Easter, April 27, 2008**

The things at hand were often use by Jesus to illustrate or explain spiritual truths. For instances, at the Feast of Tabernacles as the priest approached the altar and was pouring out the symbolic water Jesus cried, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink." And the next day as He stood in the temple treasury before mammoth, extinguished torches that symbolized the pillar of fire in the wilderness, Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." He used those dead torches to proclaim that He was the departed *Shekinah glory*.

So it is no surprise, to hear Him in our Gospel lesson from John 15:1-8, to use a grapevine as an illustration of spiritual truth. We do not know what called this illustration to Jesus mind. Perhaps it was His closeness to His disciples, or the moonlit tendrils of a vine in the field. The fact that Israel was thought of in terms of a vine reinforced His use of this image. For example, "The vineyard of he Lord Almighty is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the gardens of His delight" (Isaiah 5:7). The grapevine had become the symbol of the nation of Israel. The grapevine appeared on coins minted during the Maccabean period. It was a grand symbol of national life.

In John 15:1 Christ gives His seventh and final great "I AM": "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener." All the conversation stopped at this powerful pronouncement. Jesus calling himself the "True Vine" as the meaning, true, real, genuine was an astonishing statement and the people who heard Him were in awe. It is a curious fact that the symbol of the vine is never used in the Old Testament apart from the idea of degeneration. The point of Isaiah's picture is that the vineyard has run wild. Jeremiah complains that the nation has turned into "degenerate and become a wild vine." It is as if Jesus said: "You think that because you belong to the nation of Israel you are a branch of the true vine of God. But the nation is, a degenerate vine, as all your prophets saw. I am the true vine. The fact that you are a Jew will not save you. The only thing that can save you is to have

an intimate living fellowship with ME, for I am the vine of God and you must be braches joined to me.” Jesus was stating the fact that not Jewish blood but faith in Him was the way to God’s salvation. No external qualification can set a man right with God; only the friendship of Jesus Christ can do that.

**Looking for Fruit:** Souls can be fruit and I think that was what Paul was referring to in Romans 1:13: “I planned many times to come to you, in order that I might have a harvest among you.” We need to read and understand what the prophet Isaiah says in chapter 5:1-2: “Now let me sing to my Well-beloved a song of my Beloved regarding His vineyard: my Well-beloved has a vineyard on a very fruitful hill. He dug it up and cleared out its stones, and planted it with choicest vine. He built a tower in its midst, and also made a winepress in it; so He expected it to bring forth good grapes, but it brought forth wild grapes.”

What was this “bad fruit,” these worthless grapes? “And He [God] looked for justice, but behold, oppression; for righteousness; but behold, a cry for help” (Isaiah 7:7). The fruits He was looking for were the qualities of Justice and righteousness, inner qualities.

In the Gospel of John 15 the fruit Jesus speaks of is not primarily evangelism but simply the reproduction of the life of the vine in the branch. Jesus is looking for the fruit of His life in us. If the inward graces of the Holy Spirit are not present in our lives: “Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23). If these qualities are not present in our lives, we must face the fact that we may not be true believers. There must be something of the life of the vine in us if we belong to God! There must be Christ-likeness. This is a tougher test than outward fruit such as the number of souls saved, people influenced, or money collected. It is possible to have the outward signs with having the life of Christ within. Furthermore, the inward graces of the Spirit will in time bring the outward fruit. The fruit Christ looks for is His own life in us. The question is how do we get it?

**Pruning for Fruit:** “...*every branch that does bear fruit He prunes so that it will e even more fruitful*” (John 15:2). The branches that are doing well, those that best convey the life of the vine get the knife. Anyone who has driven through the San Joaquin Valley in central California vineyards understands what he Lord is talking about. In the winter all you see for

miles is bare, twisted trunks. But in the summer, what meets the eye are endless rows of lush green grapevines expanding their foliage so fast you can almost see them grow. Their health is directly proportionate to their pruning. A grapevine will never produce anywhere near its potential without being pruned!

It may be that Jesus has this in mind, wanting us to grow healthy delicious fruit in our Christian life. What is involved in pruning? Pain. Pruning always hurts! David said in psalm 119:67: "Before I was afflicted I went astray." And in Psalm 119:71: "It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees." Sometimes the pain of pruning comes because of sins. Other times it is simply because we are bearing abundant fruit and God wants us to bear more. No one naturally wants the knife. Nevertheless, the results of God's pruning will be beneficial for us and for Him.

Often we Christians are subject to what I call the "when syndrome." "When I get spiritually mature, these things won't happen to me." "When I get married, I will not struggle this way anymore." "When I retire, my life will be easier." Afflictions would only stop if they were useless, and that is why they never stop. Without pruning, a vineyard would never be in full bloom.

Experience taught our Brother James this great truth: "Dear brothers, is your life full of difficulties and temptations? Then be happy, for when the way is rough, your patience has a chance to grow. So let it grow, and don't try to squirm out of your problems. For when your patience is finally in full bloom then you will be ready for anything, strong in character, full and complete" (James 1:2-3).

**Abiding for Fruit:** *"Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:4-5).* What is abiding or remaining in Christ mean? To me (although the text doesn't explicitly say it), the sap that runs between the vine and the branches is suggestive of the Holy Spirit. So remaining or abiding in parallel to being filled with the Holy Spirit. We have already seen that abiding in Christ produces the fruit of the Holy Spirit. We must set aside everything from which we might derive our own strength and merit and draw all from Christ.

Jesus says that abiding in Him involves the belief that “apart from me you can do nothing.” Actually there are many things we can do without Christ. We can earn a living, raise a family, and practice generosity. It is possible to pastor a church without abiding. It is possible to counsel people without abiding. So what does Christ mean? Jesus means that we cannot bear spiritual fruit without Him. We can tie fruit onto our lives like ornaments on a Christmas tree, but the real fruit of His character comes from the vine itself. We can do nothing without Him! We cannot be loving or patient or faithful or holy. That is why God does not shield us from the assaults of life but rather exposes us to them so we will learn to hold Him fast. Jesus taught, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3). Abiding involves a growing sense of weakness. Those who learn to abide stay put for the pruning. We must choose to abide, to get into the Word, to associate with others who are remaining in Christ, to keep growing.

**Enjoying the Fruit:** What fruit specifically did Jesus choose to mention on this occasion? “If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and I will be given you.” **(1.) An empowered prayer life.** As we pray, we abide. As we abide, we pray more, and more deeply. “This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciple.” **(2.) The Father is glorified.** “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my father’s commands and remain in his love.” **(3.) Love will fill our lives!** “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.” **(4.) The joy of Jesus in us!** This, my friend is the gigantic secret of the Christian. Peter called it “Joy unspeakable and full of glory” (I Peter 1:8).

Jesus is the Vine, we are the branches, and the Father is the Gardener. Everything the Father and Son do is geared to enhance our abiding and our fruitfulness. With each trimming, may there be more of Christ in us, for God’s glory and the blessing of others.