

## **I AM...THE TRUE VINE**

John 15:1-11

Kelly Boyte Brill  
Avon Lake UCC  
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All writing teachers will give this advice: “Don’t use cliches in your writing.” Cliches are, by definition, uninteresting. But sometimes a cliché is all that comes to mind. On Thursday, I kept thinking of the cliché, “Life can change in an instant.”

I began Thursday by arriving at church early to watch a video of a sermon about our passage for today. The Rev. Adam Hamilton of the Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City preached a four-week sermon series last fall called Lessons from the Vineyard. Church of the Resurrection is a 28,000 member church so they have impressive resources including a full-time camera and video production crew. Over the course of a year Adam and his crew visited a vineyard several times and learned about vines and grapes. The winemakers showed Adam how to prune a vine, and why it’s necessary. He planted new vines and he helped to pick grapes. Then, during the course of this sermon series, he showed video footage from the vineyard to help people understand the meaning of the vine imagery in the Bible. I’d heard about this sermon series when we visited the church last fall. I wanted to see what I could learn from his sermon about our passage from John 15 as part of my sermon preparation for today. So I watched all 40 minutes of his sermon, pausing along the way to take notes.

From 10 until 1 on Thursday, we had a staff meeting at the Buoy. When we concluded, a little after 1, I checked my phone and listened to a voice mail from Rick Fortney. He told me that Ruth Williams had come to the church where he’s working in Amherst to look at the pipe organ there and give him some pointers. The organ sits up on a loft.

When she got up to leave, she took one step backward and then began somersaulting down ten steps, ending up on her back. When he called me, he was with her at the ER. The church staff was immediately concerned and we all began praying for Ruth.

I left to meet them and Glenn, and as I was driving, I kept thinking, "Life can change in an instant." I had another call to return, too, so as I was driving, (but using my hands-free system in my car), I called CJ. At the end of the conversation, I told CJ where I was going and why, and CJ's prayers joined in. I left messages for Mary Fancher and Jim Kitora, who were both teaching school on Thursday. As soon as they heard about Ruth, more prayers were spoken. By Thursday night, many people had heard through the grapevine that life had changed in an instant for our dear Ruth.

Driving home from the ER, my thoughts turned again to my sermon, but my focus had changed. I was no longer so concerned about explaining in detail the imagery of the pruning of the vine. Instead, I was in awe of the vine that is our church community, the ways in which we are bound up in each other's lives. I conducted a memorial service out of town on Friday so I wasn't able to visit Ruth on Friday, but at least three other members of our church did...one a minister, and one a Stephen Minister. More prayers, more connection.

Our passage for today, like our passage for last week, appears in John's gospel as part of Jesus' farewell speech to his disciples. He is giving them instructions for how to live when he is no longer physically present among them. He's reminding them of everything he's taught them, through his words and actions. These words are meant to be encouraging. "You still have my spirit," Jesus says. "I don't mean just a memory of me, and a memory of the things I've said and done. I mean my Spirit, a living source of life-giving energy."

As the author of the gospel of John is writing these words, he's also thinking of his own community. Life in the early church was precarious. Rome was breathing down the neck of those who called themselves Christians. Christians and Jews and Jewish Christians constantly and vigorously debated where the line was...can you be a Christian and still be Jewish? Early believers and followers of Jesus had expected that the world was going to change dramatically and now it's been a few decades, so some Christians were discouraged and some were confused. John writes these words with Jesus' twelve disciples in mind, but also with his own community in mind.

The message is the same to both. The spirit of Jesus is alive. And to try to describe it more vividly, he uses this beautiful image, one all of them would have known in a land of many vineyards. Jesus is the central vine. We who follow Jesus are the branches. Branches draw their nutrients from the vine. There is no life for a branch apart from the vine. It is the vine that is rooted in the soil. From the vine comes everything that is nourishing. John says to his church, "Jesus is still here, and our community is the evidence."

If a community is rooted in Christ, it will have two characteristics: it will be a community of love and it will be a community that bears fruit. This passage calls us to constantly look at our lives, as individuals and as a community, and ask ourselves, "Am I producing good fruit? Are we as a church producing good fruit, fruit that brings more love into the world?"

There is no way to talk about the image of a vine without talking about pruning. There would be no grapes, and no wine, without a sharp set of pruning shears and the courage to use them. In the early spring, grape growers and winemakers trim back 90%

of the branches produced the previous season. The more you trim, the more flavorful and healthy the grapes will be. Pruning is a reminder that more isn't always better.

How does this analogy work in our individual lives? There is a time to evaluate how productive our lives are. I don't mean just in the secular world. I don't mean how much money we're making, how fast we're climbing the career ladder. But in the world of God's values. How much love are we bringing forth into the world? What are we doing to contribute to a more just society? How much compassion and generosity are we producing? In order to produce more spiritual fruit, we need to trim back other parts of our lives. We only have so much time and so much energy. A person that is spread too thin is like a vine that has been allowed to grow and grow and grow. There may be a few leaves and grapes at the end of each branch, but they're not healthy, they're not good for anything. Pruning our own lives means prayerfully assessing the way we're spending our time, our energy and our money and making hard choices about what's really important.

And it's the same way for us as a church. This is exactly the conversation we're going to participate in over the next two months in our Vision 2020 meetings. Realizing that one church can't be all things to all people, what do we want to focus on as a church over the next five to ten years? What is God calling us to do and be? We may need to cut off some of our branches so that others can become more fruitful.

I'm curious and excited to hear how these conversations go. One outcome I already know for sure. We will remain committed as a congregation to welcoming all people who seek to walk in the ways of Jesus, all people who long for the good news, all people who want to grow and serve, all people who want to be a part of a community that is rooted in Christ. And there are so many people who need community in our world.

We are learning that having a lot of connections is not the same as being in authentic community. For a while, we were lured into thinking that having a lot of Facebook friends would alleviate our loneliness. Now we have discovered that, while there are certainly benefits to social media, in many cases, social media can lead to feelings of isolation. Every week, I talk to people who tell me they feel lonely. People of every age and life circumstance.

I went to bed Thursday night praying for Ruth and Glenn, and I woke up Friday morning praying for Ruth and Glenn. Both times I thought, “What it would be like to be in their situation without a church community?” “How lonely would that be?”

The cliché is true: life can change in an instant. But community is not created in an instant. It takes time to create true, authentic relationships. It takes time to nurture our relationships with God and with one another. It means saying “no” to some activities so that we can say “yes” to prayer, to study, to worship, to participating in mission and service, to conversations where we get real with one another.

Several years ago, I was invited to a clergy gathering, a continuing education event. There were about eight or ten of us from the west side of Cleveland. We were sitting in a circle, and the facilitator asked us to write down a metaphor for our ministry. We had several minutes to think, and then we were asked to share what we wrote and why. One minister said, “I feel like a CEO.” One said, “I feel like a development officer, always fundraising.” When it was my turn, I said, “I like to think of ministry as matchmaking. There’s nothing I love more than connecting people to each other and connecting people to ministries within the church. When I hear that someone has gone through a certain experience and I know that someone else in the church has experienced something similar, I’ll encourage them to talk to each other, to share their stories, to support

each other and know they're not alone. I love to introduce people whom I think might make good friends, people who have something in common. Nothing is more fun for me than finding the right fit when a person is looking for a way to share their talents and interests." The rest of the people in the room looked at me strangely when I described myself as matchmaker, but I stand by it. We are part of the same vine. It strengthens us in difficult times. When I'm having trouble feeling the love of God for some reason, when my own life is in a dry spell, someone else on our branch will be able to draw upon the nutrients of the vine for me and keep our branch healthy. Life is too hard to try to go it alone. We need each other and we need the source of life and love that is found in Jesus, the true vine.

In that spirit of the living Christ, we abide, we make our home. Tonight we will be welcoming several new members into the life of our church. They will be introduced in worship next week. Our branches are growing, and so is our fruitfulness. This week a new program was launched in our church called FUTR: Families United Through Recovery. Twice a month we are hosting a support group for family members and friends of those living with addiction. The slogan of the group is, "We don't heal in isolation, but in community."

Jesus is the true vine, the source of our life. When we grow in love and service, we are branches bearing fruit, intricately connected to God and to one another.