

John 15:1-8 “I am the true vine...”

¹ “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. ² He takes away every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and everyone that does he prunes so that it bears more fruit. ³ You are already pruned because of the word that I spoke to you. ⁴ Remain in me, as I remain in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me. ⁵ I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing. ⁶ Anyone who does not remain in me will be thrown out like a branch and wither; people will gather them and throw them into a fire and they will be burned. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you. ⁸ By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

Context

Here in the Easter season the first reading for this Sunday comes from Acts of the Apostles. There is a certain sense of appropriateness to that selection as we pay attention to the time after the Resurrection when the apostles and disciples were about the process of becoming “church” (*ekklesia*) – those who were “called out” to do the work of the Lord. At first blush it might seem odd that the Gospel looks back to the events before the Passion, Death and Resurrection.

Our gospel (vv.1-8) is the first portion of the remarkable “Vine and Branches” metaphor (John 15:1-17) from the Farewell Discourse following the Last Supper (John 14-16). Next Sunday we will hear vv.9-17. The Farewell Discourse is the centerpiece of the three sections that comprise the events of the Last Supper:

The Farewell Meal (13:1–38)

The Foot Washing
Discourse by Jesus on Communal Service
Jesus Prophesies His Betrayal
The Love Commandment and Prophecy of Peter’s Denial

The Farewell Discourse (14:1–16:33)

“I Will Not Leave You Orphaned” (14:18)
“I Am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life” (14:6)
“If You Love Me, You Will Keep My Commandments” (14:15)
“Get up, let us go” (14:31)
“Remain in My Love” (15:9) ← *our reading*
“I Have Chosen You Out of the World” (15:19)
“It Is Better for You That I Go” (16:7)

Jesus’ Farewell Prayer (17:1–26)

The Farewell Discourse, as a whole, points to an event whose arrival is imminent—that is, Jesus’ passion, death, resurrection, and ascension. In John 14–16, Jesus explains the significance of his departure to his disciples and points them toward the life that they will lead after all these things come to pass – the very life described in the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles.

Before beginning to look at the “Vine and Branches” it would perhaps be good to consider the Farewell Discourse as a whole. Gail O’Day [753] provides a wonderful context for our gospel in her summary of John 14:

“It is the wonder of the Farewell Discourse that on the eve of Jesus’ own death, he pauses to speak to the disciples about their fears, anxieties, and despair. The words he offers in John 14 are not simplistic offers of comfort and assurance, however, but derive from his knowledge of the love of God for him and his ‘own,’ and his confidence in the triumph of that love over ‘the

ruler of this world.’ In John 14, Jesus moves the disciples beyond the present moment in which they are living into the future that is grounded in the certitude of the resurrection and the gift of the Spirit. He offers them a vision of a future shaped by the promises of God, in which God is always present to them—through their love for one another and through the communal indwelling of God, Jesus, and the Paraclete. Over and over again in John 14, Jesus sounds the note that the disciples will not face the future alone, that the gift God has given to them in Jesus will not terminate with the end of Jesus’ life, but will take on new shape when, under the guidance of the Paraclete, as they live out God’s commandment to love.”

Commentary

The ancient Old Testament allegory of Israel as Yahweh’s vine becomes deeply Christianized at this point. Jesus is the true vine of which the Father takes personal care, pruning the barren branches, trimming clean the fruitful. These latter are the disciples who have accepted Jesus’ life-giving word. They are invited, encouraged to live on, to abide in Jesus. The Greek word for “abide/remain,” *menō*, occurs eleven times in these few verses, a repeated insistence on the return of Jesus by indwelling. The other all-important word is “love.” Just as “abide/remain” is the essential word of verses 1–8, so “love” becomes essential in vv.9–17. Consider how the “Vine and Branches” metaphor concludes: “*It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you. This I command you: love one another.*” (John 15:16-17)

The central teaching of this allegory is clear. Remaining in Jesus through love is essential. If this happens, when it happens, the disciple will produce fruit (vv. 5, 8). When it does not happen, the disciple is no disciple at all, but good for nothing but fuel (v. 6).

The True Vine

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower.” (15:1) ... *“I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing.”* (15:5)

The symbol of the vine has a rich tradition in the Hebrew Scriptures and it is easy to see that Jesus is very much rooted within the tradition as he speaks to his disciples. In Sir 24:16–17, for example, Wisdom compares herself to a vine: “*I bud forth delights like a vine; my blossoms are glorious and rich fruit.*” The song of the vineyard (Isa 5:1–7) offers the parade example of “vine” as a symbol for the people of God. In this text, “*the house of Israel and the people of Judah*” are explicitly identified as “*the vineyard of the Lord*” (v. 7). The failure of Judah to live in justice and righteousness is expressed through the metaphor of yielding fruit: God, the planter, expected grapes, but Judah produced only wild grapes (vv. 2, 4). These verses also make use of the language of clearing away (v. 5) and pruning (v. 6) to describe God’s actions toward the vineyard. Similar imagery reappears in Jer 2:21; Ezek 19:10–14; Hos 10:1; Ps 80:8–19; Isa 27:2–6; and Ezek 15:1–8; 17:7–8. Vine imagery remained a symbol for Israel in rabbinic Scripture interpretation, as well as in the synoptic Gospels (Matt 21:33–46; Mark 12:1–12; Luke 20:9–16). The vine imagery in John 15:1–17 should thus be read in the context of the rich use of this symbol in Jewish Scriptures and tradition.

In the “I am” (*egō eimi*) saying of 15:1, as with the symbols of the other “I am” statements in the Gospel according to John, the traditional symbol of the vine is wholly redefined by its christological content. Jesus does not simply adapt the vine imagery in order to suggest that he is now the true Israel. The fuller identification of Jesus as the vine (vv. 1 and 5) is described by the verses that fall between.

In v. 1, Jesus’ self-identification is lodged in the context of his relationship with God, in v. 5 in the context of his relationship with the community of his followers. When Jesus speaks of himself as the vine, then, his words are not only self-revelatory, but are revelatory of the interrelationship of God, Jesus, and the community in the life of faith as well. All three elements—gardener, vine, and branches—are essential

to the production of fruit. The repetition of the “I am” saying in vv. 1 and 5 positions Jesus as the middle ground between God and the community.

Even more than the “shepherd” imagery in John 10, which conveys the notion of the intimacy between Jesus and his “sheep,” the illustration of a vine and its branches focuses on the organic, vital connection that Jesus has with his followers, a connection that will be made possible in the future through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

But many scholars suggest there is also something to the idea of being the “true” Israel. In the OT, the people/tribes/nation of Israel was the channel through whom God’s blessings were to flow to humanity and all the world. In Isaiah’s vision those blessings flowed from the Temple out to all the world; Jerusalem was to be the light on the hill calling all people to one, true God. Many of the Jewish festivals carried such intentions and hopes. Later in John we see Jesus presented as the true temple, and here, as the new Israel connecting God and people. (Note: St. Paul is more concrete in his symbolism, noting that it is the gentiles who are grafted onto the stock root of Israel, speaking to continuity rather than replacement which some argue based on John 15 alone). What is perhaps more precise is that Jesus becomes the focus of God’s plan of salvation, with the implication that faith in Jesus becomes the decisive characteristic for membership among God’s people. Whereas OT Israel was ethnically constrained, the new messianic community, made up of believing Jews and Gentiles, is united by faith in Jesus the Messiah. Jews still have a place in God’s family, but they must come to God on his terms. This speaks to the paradigm shift of which St. Paul speaks in Galatians and Romans: faith in Jesus has replaced keeping the law as the primary point of reference.

The Vine Grower

Like the song of the vineyard in Isaiah 5, John 15:2 depicts the role of God as the grower who spades, clears, plants and takes care of the vineyard only to be rewarded with wild/sour grapes (Isa. 5:1–7; cf. Ps. 80:8–9). According to 15:2, the vinedresser does two things to ensure maximum fruit production (“*he takes away ... he prunes*”; cf. Heb. 6:7–8): (1) in the winter he cuts off the dry and withered branches, which may involve pruning the vines to the extent that only the stalks remain; (2) later, when the vine has sprouted leaves, he removes the smaller shoots so that the main fruit-bearing branches receive adequate nourishment

The description of God’s actions toward both unproductive and productive branches involves a word play that is difficult to reproduce in an English translation. The verb for “prune” (*kathairō*) in v. 2b is a compound form of the root verb “to take away” (*airō*), which is used in v. 2a. One scholar chooses to translate the two verbs as “cuts clean” and “cuts off.” This may come closest to giving the English-language reader a sense of how the Greek reader would have heard this verse.

Taking Away and Pruning

There appears to only be two acts of the vine grower in this analogy and both involve cutting (v.2). One cutting is to destroy the branch the other is to improve the branch's fruit bearing ability. Note that both of these verbs are in the present tense; they are ongoing activities. The grower continues to cut out the dead and prune the good. Yet interestingly, neither of these terms (*airo* nor *kathairo*) are primarily horticultural terms. The word *airo* means "to lift up and carry (away)." It is used of the Lamb of God taking away the sins of the world (John 1:29). Something that is "taken away" may be "destroyed," the meaning of the word in John 11:48.

Although this is the only instance of *kathairo* in the NT, there are a number of related words (*katharizo*, *katharismos*, *katharos*, *katharotes*) used in the NT that clearly indicate that the stem *kathar-* refers to the elimination of ritual impurities or contaminations. Terms related to "clean" or "purify" are frequently used to translate this group of words. For example, the jars of purification in John 2:6 (see also 3:25); and the

cleanliness of the disciples in John 13:10-11. Given the context of vine growing, *kathairo* is translated “prune.”

As the Johannine scholar, Fr. Raymond Brown notes [660], while there is attestation to the use of these words in an agricultural sense, there are always other verbs needed to put the words in context. Like other scholars, Brown believes that these words were chosen for the “word play/verbal similarity” at one level, and because of the many layers of potential meaning. Typically in John's writing, there are many layers of meaning (e.g. *anōthen* in the encounter with Nicodemus). God, the vine grower, can prune the branches, which can also be understood as a cleansing or purifying of the disciples.

One could ask what are the “tools” of the trade for the vine grower. Looking ahead to v.3 it is identified as “*the word that I spoke to you.*” This last verb is a perfect tense which implies an action in the past with continuing effect in the present. It can be legitimately translated in the present tense: “which Jesus speaks to you.” Jesus' word was not just something spoken back in history. It was that, but the power of that word continues to cleanse and purify and prune “wooden,” fruit-bearing Christians today. This power of the word to cut is confessed well in Hebrews 4:12: “*Indeed, the word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart.*” Consider St. Peter in his encounter at the end of John's gospel as Jesus prunes away Peter's denial: “*Do you love me?*”

Verses 2-5 speak to the effects/necessity of pruning for the faithful disciples: bear more fruit (v.2), pruned by the Word (v.3), need to remain in Jesus in order to continue to bear fruit (vv.4-5). St. Peter might well be the example of all of these played out in the life of a believer.

Bearing Fruit

The OT prophets envisioned a time when Israel would “*bud and blossom and fill all the world with fruit*” (Isa. 27:6; cf. Hos. 14:4–8). What is the “fruit” that the gardener expects from the branches? When chapter 15 is read in context of John 14 it is evident that loving Jesus (vv.15, 21, 23) forms part of the answer. When read in the context of John 13, loving each other (vv.34-35) forms another part of the answer. In the light of the what is understood as the two greatest commandments, “love” is the expected fruit. If so, then the unproductive branches of 15:2 are the people who are in Jesus, in the community of faith, who are not loving, who are not seeking the good of the whole body.

Leon Morris writes [594]: “The part of the Father here is decisive. He watches over the vine and takes action like that of a vinedresser to secure fruitfulness. Every fruitless branch he takes away (cf. Matt. 3:10). We should not regard this as a proof that true believers may fall away. It is part of the viticultural picture, and the point could not be made without it. The emphasis is on the bearing of fruit. That is the only reason for growing a vine; as Ezekiel pointed out long before, a vine does not yield timber (Ezek. 15). In a vineyard fruitfulness is not simply desirable; it is imperative; that is the whole point of the vineyard; it is what the vineyard is for. Pruning is resorted to [in order to] ensure that this takes place. Left to itself a vine will produce a good deal of unproductive growth. For maximum fruitfulness extensive pruning is essential.”

The fruit of Christian life is never the result of allowing the natural energies and inclinations to run riot. The verb *kathairō* has the double meaning of “to prune” and “to cleanse” so that with this verb the Fourth Evangelist can simultaneously evoke agricultural realism and theological truth. Jesus' words in vv. 3–4a build on this double meaning and equate “cleansing” with staying in relationship to Jesus and his word. Jesus' abiding in the disciples provides the grounds for their faithfulness to him. These verses recall the foot washing in John 13, where cleansing was also identified as being in relationship with Jesus. The return to the agricultural metaphor in v. 4b reinforces that relationship with Jesus is the key to bearing fruit.

The “fruit” is not defined here, but we are assured that as believers we need to bear fruit. As Stoffregen reminds us: “In another context, Jesus speaks about another way of bearing much fruit, ‘I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces much fruit’ (12:24). Pruning sounds healthier than dying!” Yet the Christian scriptures are filled with the meaning of the “fruit” that we are to bear. The word fruit, or a variation of it, is used fifty-five times in the New Testament and refers to a variety of results. Each one of the following is considered by God to be fruit: repentance (Matt. 3:8; Luke 13:5-9), practicing the truth to make your Christian identity known in the world (Matt. 7:16-21; Col. 1:10), sanctification and eternal life (Rom 6:22; Phil 1:11), the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 6:22), righteousness/truth (Eph 5:9), answered prayer (John 15:7-8), an offering of money given by believers (Rom. 15:28), and winning unbelievers to Christ (Rom. 1:13).

The action of the Father is such as to cleanse his people so that they will live fruitful lives.

Remaining

Another word with a double meaning is *meno* -- translated "remain" in our text, but it also carries meanings of "abide, stay; live, dwell; last, endure, continue." Sometimes this verb refers to the branch staying connected to the vine and sometimes it refers to disciples staying connected to Jesus. This word occurs 11 times in 15:1-17. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit if it is disconnected from the vine, neither can disciples bear fruit if they are disconnected from Jesus.

While v.5 speaks of the mutual indwelling, the roles of Christ and of his followers are not to be confused. Those who so remain in Christ and have Christ remaining in them keep on bearing fruit in quantity. The verse concludes with an emphatic declaration of human helplessness apart from Christ. In isolation from him no spiritual achievement is possible. But remaining in Christ means that “*I have the strength for everything through him who empowers me.*” (Phil. 4:13)

Some argue that there may be a contrast between simply being "in Jesus" (v. 2) which allows for the possibility of not bearing fruit; and "remaining or abiding in Jesus" (vv. 4ff.) and He in them, which results in "bearing much fruit" (v. 5). In contrast to St. Peter who remained and allowed himself to be pruned, Judas did not remain. In vv.4-6, the impression is remaining/not remaining is a decision of the branch: to purposely not bear fruit or to separate from the community of love. In either case, v.2 makes clear that it is the gardener who removes the fruitless branches from the vine and the decision to leave the branch has fiery consequences (v. 6).

The imagery in v.6 of a branch that is thrown away and withers and subsequently is picked up, thrown into the fire, and burned may echo Ezek. 15:1–8, where a vine failing to produce fruit is said to be good for nothing but the fire (cf. Ezek. 19:12). “Fire” (*pyr*, only here in John’s Gospel) is a common Jewish and biblical symbol for divine judgment (e.g., Isa. 30:27; Matt. 3:12 par.; 5:22; 18:8; 25:41; Luke 12:49; Heb. 12:29; 2 Pet. 3:10; Jude 7, 23; Rev. 20:14).

Prayer

Morris captures the understanding of v.7 well as he writes [596]: “From fruit-bearing in general Jesus moves on to prayer. The passage has to do with abiding; the condition of prevailing prayer is abiding in Christ. But whereas before he has spoken of his own abiding in believers, now he speaks of his words abiding in them (cf. 14:21, 23). This is not a different attitude to prayer from that in the previous chapter. There prayer must be offered “in the name” of Christ (14:14) and obedience is strongly insisted on. The same spiritual attitude is in mind here, but from a different standpoint. The prayers of those who are truly abiding in Christ will certainly be “in the name of Christ,” that is in accordance with all that Christ stands for. And if they are really abiding in Christ they will live in obedience to the words of Christ. We should not overlook the importance of “my words.” The teaching of Jesus is important and not lightly to be passed over in the interests of promoting religious feeling. When believers abide in Christ and Christ’s

words abide in them, they live as close to Christ as well may be. Then their prayers will be prayers that are in accord with God's will and they will be fully answered."

In the end...

"By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples." This refers to remaining in Christ and bearing much fruit understanding that Christ remains in the believer, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and always under the watchful eye of the vine grower. As the Jesuit motto speaks: AMDG – *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam* – For the greater glory of God.

As Eucharist

Many Catholic scholars (Raymond Brown, Jerome Kodell, Eduard Schwizer, etc.) see a part of John's Eucharistic theology in the metaphor of the "Vine and the Branches" – specifically serving as the cup, as a type of parallel to the "Bread of Life" discourse in John 6. The vine was a recognized Eucharistic symbol at the time the Gospel according to John reached its final written form. We read in the *Didache*: "And concerning the Eucharist, hold Eucharist thus: First concerning the Cup, 'We give thanks, our Father, for the Holy Vine of David your child, which you make known to us through Jesus your child...'" (IX:1-2). The parallel is reinforced by the *egō eimi* statement "I am the true vine" corresponding to "I am the bread of life" (6:35). The discourse takes places at the Last Supper, where the presence of the cup evokes a connection with the Eucharist. In addition the emphasis on "abide/remain" and mutual love are very similar to the themes of the cup in Mark (10:38-45; 14:36).

Notes

John 15:1 true vine: The use of "true" may also suggest that there could be false "vines" from which one might seek to find nourishment for bearing fruit. These "false vines" might be other people/groups, e.g. the current religious leadership of Israel, or other religions/philosophies, e.g. Docetism, Gnosticism, or Stoicism. Some commentators suggest that the use of "true" may point to Israel as the degenerate vine (Jer. 2:21) now replaced by the true one. That is, where Israel and the covenant was the means of salvation, now Jesus is the vine leading to the Father.

John 15:2 vine grower: the Greek *geōrgos* is literally "one who tilts the soil" but is a word that also addresses the vine grower. **takes away...prunes:**

John 15:5 bear much fruit: One of the early Church Fathers was Polycarp of Smyrna. Polycarp is a bit of an odd name. Verse 5 speaks of "much fruit" – *karpos polys* – leading some to speculate this as the origin of Polycarp's name: the one who more much fruit.

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