

1/16/22 WORSHIP SERVICE

OFFERING PRAYER

God, we offer these financial gifts, alongside of our gifts of time, skills, passions and energy. We offer these gifts knowing that they all come from you. Accept these gifts, we pray, in a spirit of humble gratitude. May they be used in ways that shine your Light and reflect your goodness into our world. In Jesus' name. Amen.

WHY CHURCH?

John 15:1-17

We have a small group here in the sanctuary and I trust many of you are listening on Zoom, even though I can't see your faces.

[SLIDE: GRAPES]

Before we moved to Kansas, Beth and I were renting a farmhouse in Iowa. There was a grapevine on the yard, and we were offered as many grapes as we wanted.

After spending a summer mowing and weed trimming around it, it was excited to see the grapes ripen. We picked a number of them, and attempted to make grape juice. The grape juice was OK, but it was fun to have at least tried.

In a vine, it can be hard to tell one branch from another. They are all entangled around each other, but they are all connected to the vine.

The image of Jesus as the "true vine" is another of the vivid metaphors from the Gospel of John. John is known for simple words that have a lot of depth.

It is thought that the Gospel was written to a close-knit community of Jesus-followers who had experienced rejection from the broader Jewish nation and were trying to form an alternative way of life centered in Jesus that contrasted with the broader world.

Like the "good shepherd," the "true Bread from heaven," and the "true light," John uses this word-picture to describe who Jesus is for the community of followers that maintain a spiritual connection with him.

Christ is the vine, while disciples are branches, and God the Father tends the vine. Many of you have experience pruning plants to improve their productivity.

I remember as a teenager, a neighbor teaching me to prune apple trees from an old orchard. It was kind of a lost cause for that orchard, but I learned the basic idea.

By removing branches that are unproductive, you hope to increase the productivity of the remaining branches. The original listeners of John's Gospel had personal experience with agriculture if not grapevines.

John uses a kind of word-play that is lost in English. The vine tender "cuts off" those branches that don't produce fruit and "cuts clean" those that do have fruit, so that they will produce even more.

No branch can produce fruit unless it remains connected to the vine, the source of life. In fact, it will wither and die.

There's a comic book called "Strange Planet," in which human-like beings do ordinary activities but use odd, technical language to describe it. Each episode reveals the unseen irony or even absurdity of the ordinary rituals of human life.

In one such scene, the first being has flowers behind his back. The other, apparently his girlfriend, asks, "*Are you obscuring dying plants?*"

"*Maybe,*" comes the reply. Then he pulls out the flowers: "*I thought these were beautiful so I maimed them for you.*"

"*You maimed them for me?*" she gasps.

"*I would maim so many plants for you,*" answers the first being. Then he reminds his girlfriend, "*they thirst in their final hours.*"

She excitedly has an idea, "*I have a death cylinder!*" and leaves to find a flower vase.¹

The comic illustrates what we all know: floral arrangements are quite temporary. We create them only by cutting them off from their source of nourishment.

Jesus' lesson for the disciples is simple: "Remain in me." "Stay *in* me." I counted this word "remain" or "abide" 11 times.

"Remain in me and I will in you." "Remain in my love."

Although the later verses seem to no longer stick with the vine image, they clarify what this "remaining" really means. It's about staying connected to the love of Jesus, the love poured out for us on the cross, and carrying that love into our relationships with one another in the body and beyond.

Love is the fruit produced by staying connected to the vine. Only those branches that stay connected to the vine have nourishment to produce fruit.

¹ Nathan Pyle, *Strange Planet*

Yet in this image *all* disciples undergo pruning. Even if you produce the fruit of love in your life because of your connection to Source of love, you must still be pruned.

There is no explanation of what pruning means in practical terms. Removing all other attachments? All other loyalties? Being purified of sin?

The memory that popped into my brain was of a doctor lancing a wound in my left arm.

I was given a local anesthetic, but could watch as he dug out infected flesh, leaving a gaping hole that had to be covered with dressing until it filled in again. I can't imagine how much this would have hurt without the anesthetic.

Whatever the associations that might enter your head, the passage makes clear a result of "remaining in Christ" and producing the fruit of love in our relationships with one another.

It's joy! Jesus says: "I've said these things to you so that my joy will be in you and your joy will be full." There is no greater joy than knowing yourself to be connected to the Source of life and love, and to let that love flow through you.

There is no greater pain than our experience or illusion of separation and alienation, feeling unlovable, unworthy of love, or unable to love.

FRIENDSHIP

One of the most powerful ideas in John is that of friendship. Jesus says: "*Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.*"

Jesus goes on to tell his disciples that he no longer calls them slaves, but friends.

You know the song: "Jesus is a friend, he's a friend next to ya..." But this isn't just a "hey, Jesus, let's play some flag football" kind of friend. It's still another way of talking about being connected to the source, like a vine.

Jesus explains that slaves are just given orders, without really knowing their master's business. Jesus desires to live *in* the disciples *in* the Spirit. This makes them friends.

Friends are those who have love and affection for each other. Jesus' friendship lives out the ideal of being willing to die for the other, which he does as he goes to the cross.

Jesus showed his willingness to serve his disciples when he washed their feet, something a master would never do for servants.

The people gathered in his name have as their ideal that same quality of friendship. This is gutsy friendship and committed friendship. It is the kind of friendship that is becoming rarer in our culture as people are less rooted in any one place and we are more absorbed by our careers and the busyness of life.

The friendship between those connected to Jesus is more than a social bond or way to have a good time. This ideal of friendship cares for the other's well-being and provides a space for us to test our interpretation of scripture and our listening for God's voice.

PICTURE OF THE CHURCH

Last week, I addressed the question, "What is the church?" This week, the question is "Why church?" Why does God work through the church? Why have a church?

After all, can't God do anything? Can't God – *shazam* – instantly fix the problems created by human violence, brokenness, and sin?

In the biblical narrative, God's redemptive work is always through groups of people.

God promised to Abraham, "*I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you... all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.*"

David Fitch makes the point that God's redemptive work throughout scripture always comes through God's *presence*.

[SLIDE: PASSAGES ABOUT PRESENCE]

In Exodus 33, Moses asks God for help in order to lead the people that God has delivered from Egypt. God answers, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."

In many verses throughout the Bible, there is a refrain, almost like a creed, first applied to Israel and later to the church: "I will be your God, and you will be my people."

This is always preceded by the promise of God's presence with, among, and *in* the people. "My dwelling place will be with them" or "I will live with them and walk among them."

This is how God works.

Fitch goes on to say: "*A people gathered around a table, a people submitted to God's reign, a people who make space for God's presence and kingship: this is the church. In church, people's lives are changed, broken relationships are reconciled, people's bodies are healed, racism is exposed and confessed and vanquished, the poor among us are fed and begin to flourish, God's reign becomes visible for the neighborhood to see, and God's rule spreads like wildfire through the towns and the villages and even the higher echelons of power and wealth. All of this happens in the power of God's presence.*"

Although the Vine and Branches passage doesn't use the word "presence," it is all about the presence of Christ with us, in us, and through us.

When we “remain” in Christ and Christ in us, this is the living presence of Jesus. John uses reciprocal language – believers are “in Christ” and Christ is at the same time “in us.”

It might be easy to read this passage from John as only being about each person’s personal relationship to Christ, and miss that this is a powerful image and model for the church and about God’s presence.

If we read the image of the Vine and the Branches as a kind of model for being church, it is really pretty radical.

There’s no distinction of status or who is better than the other. There’s no massive organizational structure, marketing strategies, or programs to run. It’s not church-as-a-service designed to meet the needs of congregant-consumers.

It’s all a question of whether you are connected to Christ who is the vine, and whether the love of Christ flows into you and through you to produce the fruit of love. This fruit is seen in relationships of love between the branches, and also love for neighbor.

The commentator Gail O’Day notes one difference from the “Body of Christ” image of 1 Corinthians. There’s no distinction of gifts between the branches. The only gift is for a branch to produce the fruit of love evident in the relationship between the branches.

There’s a reason the Bible has many books with different emphases and metaphors. The different images complement each other.

The Gospel of John really strips things down to the basics, but with depth. John has such varied language to express the same thing. And, clearly, we only begin to know what the simple words in John are even talking about as we cultivate our own practices or ways of being connected to the Source, to the Vine.

We have our work cut out for us simply taking steps to move closer to this ideal of church. A church of friends. Not a club; the friendship and love extend to our neighbors, it should never be exclusive to long-term members. But it is also true that a Spirit of friendship, connected to the love of Christ, that is present in the church or different parts of the church, that simply makes us an attractive community.

No church completely meets this ideal. It is harder to create this kind of spirit at the level of the whole congregation in the larger group. Churches also have centuries of history as an institution sometimes finding renewal and reconnection to the Source, and other times bogged down in conflict, institutional politics, maintenance of institutional structures, and even violence.

The teaching of the Gospel of John can feel like lofty ideas that might not feel concrete. We have to work out what steps in our daily lives allow us to live this out command to

love as Jesus loved. That's part of the work of the conversations that we want to have as a church. Sometimes we also need to step back to recommit ourselves to our purpose, as John helps us to do.

Two things are important:

Find ways to practice connection to Christ in your own spiritual life.

And find connection to Christ through our connection with one another. This means being committed to the body, to the church.

Our vision is to be an attractive contrast to the broader culture, where God's presence can be felt based on our love for each other and our community.

[QUESTIONS]

1. Why do you believe that God chooses to work through the church?
2. What are ways the church might make space for God's healing presence or be a sign of God's reign?
3. How do you remain connected to the "vine"? How does church help you do this?

BENEDICTION

Go now in the peace of Jesus, assured that it is in his love and for his sake that we are called to be The Church. Amen.