

Imagine Jesus and his disciples walking together through Jerusalem on their way to Gethsemane where he will be arrested. As they go into the surrounding countryside he begins to talk to them about vines, vinedressers, and fruit. Maybe it was April then too and the grape vines were beginning to blossom. Maybe he reached out and took one in his hand to teach them something. But, why now? Well, they had just been told that Jesus is going away soon and that it would be up to them to carry on his mission. He wanted them to understand how that was going to happen.

And unfortunately for you, this reminds me of a very old bible joke. Biblical scholars are not all convinced that Jesus even really referred to himself in Scripture as “divine.” But now we know the clear answer to that age-old question. As Jesus clearly says “you are da branches, and I am da vine.” Sorry about that, but I couldn’t resist!

There are a number of themes that we could consider in this passage, but let’s keep it simple and concentrate on just one. That is the question, “what is it that determines the course of our lives?” Every day each of us is caught in the tension between connection and separation, between relationship and individuality. What is the best balance between the two? In this parable Jesus reminds us that God calls us to connection, to communion with him through his Son Jesus, and with one another. How important is this to God? Remember the Greatest Commandment, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind, and your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.” (Mt. 22:36-40) We often go through all kinds of mental and spiritual gymnastics trying to find ways to tone down what he says just a bit, but we know quite well the point he is making. What he means is that it is God’s will that everything we say, do, think, decide, or avoid, must be the result of living our lives based on that greatest of commandments. Wow.

The reason this is the greatest commandment is that God is directly addressing sin, a word not used much in our culture. What is sin’s greatest power? What is the “fruit” sin produces in the world? It is separation, brokenness, isolation, estrangement, and loneliness. And it is not just separation from God, but also from one another, from ourselves, and from whom God wants us to be. Throughout our lives we are aware at various times that deep within us there is *something* missing, that there is something that needs fixed, or done, or completed, or learned, or discovered. We try all kinds of ways to solve the problem, but nothing works for very long because we are dealing with symptoms instead of the underlying cause. That cause is that we are living in ways that do not reflect our true identity as creatures of God, but that is who we are. We can certainly pretend that is not the case, and many people do, but that does not change the truth that God is the source of all that it, including you and me.

You have to give sin credit. Sin is really, really good at what it does. It can look and sound so attractive and healthy and good as it goes about its mission. It can even convince us that it is not real. Sin tells us what we want to hear, that we are the center of the universe and that we really need to concentrate on what we want and need. Whenever sin wins the day, there are broken, unhappy, frustrated people and unhealthy relationships. When sin wins the day, we don’t look within ourselves to identify our own responsibility, but simply point to others and blame them for our frustration, unhappiness, and insecurity. It is so much easier that way, but we wonder why things don’t really ever seem to improve very much.

Sin also whispers to us that we really don’t measure up, that we are not as good, or gifted, or worthwhile as a lot of other people. Sin whispers, “It they *really* knew you, they wouldn’t like you.” One way we deal with that is to try to tear others down although that really doesn’t work very well. And so, too many of us live with the constant tension of how much of our true selves we dare to reveal to others. What makes this so difficult is that we are comparing our *insides* to other peoples’ *outsides*. In other words, we compare our full and complete awareness of who we really are with what others choose

to reveal about who they are. For example, a smile can mask real pain and loneliness, or even despair, but we often do not know that. Think of your closest personal relationships and how they came to be. First a hello and a handshake, then some quite safe small talk. If that goes well, we venture out a bit more and reveal something a little more personal while gaging the response of the other person. If the other person seems to take a comparable step, we feel safe enough to continue this process into a deeper and more authentic relationship, sort of like a dance. The more levels of trust we develop, the closer the relationship, but even then we set limits as to how far we will go with self-revelation. Christian psychologist Carl Rogers said, “The more personal something is, the more universal it is.” What an incredible healing and loving feeling we experience when we do venture out and reveal an inner truth we are not proud of and have the other person say, “Yeah, me too.” There is such power in shared experience, especially shared suffering, and let us not forget that we are loved by the God who has shared every human experience through his Son.

OK fine, what does this have to do with the vine? As branches on that vine, we are intimately connected with God and one another. When we try to live as if that were not the case we will never know the joy and the freedom of truly living as our God-given selves. We can pretend that we are apart and individual, but in this teaching, Jesus is reminding us of the truth that we are intimately connected, whether we like it or not, whether we choose to acknowledge it or not. Of course, our world and our culture encourage us to ignore that reality and calls us to live primarily for ourselves. It entices us to try to stay young, or at least look young, forever, to become as rich as possible, and to serve our own needs first. The result is a large number of people living for themselves and pulling out of interpersonal relationships at the first sign of pain or conflict. We all know people who live shallow, empty lives, and only engage in superficial safe relationships because they are afraid to reveal themselves. It is so very sad, and so very unnecessary.

Well, if the fruit of sin is separation, what is the fruit that we produce in our lives that Jesus talks about? What determines the “fruit,” or “output” of our lives? That is simple. It emerges from whatever sources of authority we choose for our lives. Since God has given us total free will, different people make radically different choices. Who or what do we consult in our daily decisions and ranking of priorities? If sin is calling the shots, people will just have conversations with themselves. They will consult their own needs and concerns and habits and choose what is appropriate behavior for themselves. They will never truly grow as human beings since they have set very narrow and predictable and self-fulfilling limits in their lives, Again, it is so sad, and so avoidable.

If we choose to live as branches on that vine, our main source of authority and wisdom is the Word of God as revealed through Jesus Christ. Think about that for a moment. When you and I create something, don’t we know everything there is to know about it? The same is true of God the Creator. He is our Creator, our source, the one who made us who we are, and is our Partner throughout our lives whether we acknowledge that or not. When we recognize who we are and live our lives out of that identity, what will be the fruit of the vine that will emerge? Maybe it is best described by the Apostle Paul in Galatians 5 when he lists the fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” Aren’t those incredible words? How well do they describe us? Now, these are not things we have the power or the will to generate on our own, apart from the vine. Separate from the vine, we have cut ourselves off from the source of truth, and we are living a lie. And once again, many people do, but they do not have to.

We can’t leave this story without considering this pruning image because it is a tough one. He goes on to say, “My Father removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.” I think what he is talking about is the fact that for us to grow as human beings there are parts of us that will have to go, to be pruned in other words. Some of our self-

serving habits, opinions, conclusions, beliefs, and behaviors will have to be pruned in order to make room for healthy new growth and a joyful new life, Painful? You bet. Worthwhile? Absolutely yes.

So, my friends, each of us has a decision to make. It is not a one-time and forget it kind of decision, but one we must make over and over again, and if we do not decide, that is our decision. Do we give in and take the easy way of pleasing ourselves, or do we remind ourselves of that vine from which we get our nourishment and our direction and make that the source of our life choices and priorities?

In closing, remember when Jesus talked about doing good deeds in secret? In Matthew 4 he says, “But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.” I invite you to take on a secret experiment to prove who you are. Sometime this week do something really nice and thoughtful for another person, preferably something that requires some sacrifice on your part. No one else can know about it as it is between you and the One who created you. Afterwards, reflect a bit on how you feel inside. That will give you a taste of what it is like to live as the person you really are, connected to the vine that is the source of goodness and love. Amen