

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk

(Delivered on Sunday, May 3, 2015)

Text: John 15:1-8 (The Inclusive Bible)

I am the true vine, and my Abba is the vine grower who cuts off every branch in me that doesn't bear fruit, but prunes the fruitful ones to increase their yield.

You've been pruned already, thanks to the word that I have spoken to you.

Live on in me, as I do in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit of itself apart from the vine, neither can you bear fruit apart from me.

I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who live in me and I in them will bear abundant fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

Those who don't live in me are like withered, rejected branches, to be picked up and thrown on the fire and burned.

If you live on in me, and my words live on in you, ask whatever you want and it will be done for you.

My Abba will be glorified if you bear much fruit and thus prove to be my disciples.

Reflections by Pastor Donald: **"Loving Vine, Loving Branches"**

As I lay tossing on my bed of pain this week, I had plenty of time to think on today's images of vine, branches and fruit. Okay, as usual, I'm being overly dramatic. I really wasn't in so much pain as I was in a fog of cold symptoms, and I must admit that I wasn't thinking about these Christly images nearly as much as I was catching up on some much needed rest and a couple missed episodes of Nashville. Too revealing?

But seriously, folks, our lectionary scriptures for today speak of that thing that all of life boils down to – especially when we find ourselves at the end of our rope or vine, as it were, and realize anew where our true connection lies.

In our passage from John's gospel that Faith read so beautifully for us, we hear Jesus claiming the image of the true vine and acknowledging his creator, his Abba, as the vinegrower. And taking the image even further, he calls his disciples and, by extension, each one of us the branches of that vine, encouraged to bear fruit, and, if not, to be pruned away that more Christ energy may go to those fruit bearing branches.

Now, I don't see this pruning away as a scary image, but rather as an encouraging one. Without pruning there is no truly productive and glorious fruit possible on the vine. Rather, the energy that puts forth the fruit is used up on many useless twigs and suckers (appropriately named) that keep the fruit from forming or becoming all it can be.

As our Seasons of the Spirit curriculum told us this week, "The vine is a familiar image in the Hebrew Scriptures. In the biblical lands, vineyards were important to Israel's agricultural life. Extensive work was needed to prepare the ground for cultivating vines. Strong walls and a watch-tower were built to protect vines from people and animals. Most of the grapes became wine, [and] a productive vineyard was seen as a sign of God's favor."

There is much to be squeezed out of this image of the vine and what it represents and produces for us, isn't there? The work that's needed to prepare the soil for the vine in the first place is extensive and fraught with the possibility of failure. Jesus's parable of the sower and the seed comes to mind as we realize that a vine planted in the wrong kind of soil can produce nothing but leaves or wither in place.

Only with a soil such as God prepares and cares for can there grow such a one as the Christ whose vine stretches sunward and puts forth bountiful branches that can produce much fruit.

If we are indeed the branches, it is only by being connected to the one true vine that we will put forth the fruit God desires and draw others to be grafted to that vine as well that they may themselves be Christ's branches, producing the fruits of kindness, patience, hopefulness and love among so many other fruits of the spirit.

"Jesus calls himself "the true vine," our Seasons of the Spirit tells us, "identifying his followers, then and now, as the branches. The Christian community is one body with many members, one vine with many branches that nourish its growth. The branches are only strong when they are connected with the vine stem. Jesus calls those who follow to abide – remain – in him."

"Looking closely [at a grapevine]," our UCC theologian Kate Huey muses, "we see the many entwined branches, winding their way around one another in intricate patterns of tight curls that make it impossible to tell where one branch starts or another one ends. This is not just intricate;" she writes, "it's intimate, and the vine shares with its branches the nutrients that sustain it, the life force of the whole plant...this vine is one with the branches."

In our coming together and being a community with Christ at our center, we become one with Christ and grow profoundly stronger in that realization.

In the last months, I have seen an incredible example of how strong Christ's vine is here and how much fruit has been produced by the love present in this place for God and for one another. As we have cared for Lester and Vivi and Sue during their challenging times recently, I have realized anew how much the connections here mean and how much they can produce real healing through prayer and care and even car as Carlos was chauffeured back and forth to the hospital.

There are so many ways we can produce fruit from our connection to Christ's vine and the intertwining of our branches together to produce the fruit of God's good vineyard.

"Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God;" another of our lectionary scriptures for today from 1 John 4 states... "everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love...No one has ever seen God. Yet if we love one another; God dwells in us, and God's love is brought to perfection in us."

I love the way these verses from both of our lectionary passages today compliment each other. Love is God and that love is reflected in Jesus as the vine. The beloved of God are the branches pulling the love from the vine to produce fruit on the branches. We are connected through love, and the love from God allows us to love one another and produce rich full branches that bear much fruit.

"We hear that word, "love," often in John's writings," Kate Huey states. "Love is at the heart of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Love is the measure of faithfulness."

Our love for God is shown in the way in which we love one another and in the way we love our enemies as well as our friends. I am convinced that if each person in the world could find a way to feel love for the person or group they disagree with or THINK they have nothing in common with, we could flourish as people on this planet. As long as we hold one another in hatred or keep our anger fresh for the way in which we've been wronged or misunderstood, we cannot grow the fruit God wishes for the world or present a healthy vine that supports the growth and productivity of more branches, and thereby more fruit.

"God abides in us, most especially, when we love," Dr. Bruce Epperly writes in his essay, "Flourishing in Love". "Abiding in love opens the door for us to have Christ-like experiences of congruence of our will with God's vision for our lives and the world. Sacrifices for the greater community are not losses but invitations to become large-souled, experiencing the peace that comes when we align our well-being with the well-being of others and our planet... Our true destiny is to be fruitful in our own unique way, blossoming and bearing fruit in partnership with the vine."

Let me leave you today with a new poem I found by Ted Loder, so perfect for today, called, "The Deepest Wonder of All." (Unable to print without permission. Found in his book, "My Heart in My Mouth").