

## I AM: The Vine

John 15:1-17 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. <sup>2</sup> He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. <sup>3</sup> You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. <sup>5</sup> "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup> If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. <sup>7</sup> If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup> This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. <sup>9</sup> "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. <sup>10</sup> If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. <sup>11</sup> I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. <sup>12</sup> My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup> Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. <sup>14</sup> You are my friends if you do what I command. <sup>15</sup> I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. <sup>16</sup> You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. <sup>17</sup> This is my command: Love each other.

Today we come to the 7<sup>th</sup> and final of Jesus' "I AM" statements from John's Gospel: "I AM the Vine." (verse 5a) All of these "I AM" statements have focused on what only Jesus can do as God from all eternity, the only one who has no beginning and no end, power over all. This particular statement, though, focuses the most on what we are in relationship to the Great "I AM."

Jesus said, "I am the vine; you are the branches." (verse 5a) So, you and I are branches. What's so good about being a branch? Well, a branch is really nothing by itself. All alone, a branch is what you pick up off the ground and throw away or throw into a burn pit and, well, burn it. For a branch to be of any value, it must be connected to something bigger, something that gives it life – in other words, it must be connected to a vine.

"I am the vine; you are the branches." (verse 5a) You are connected to God. You are connected to him because he gave you life. A branch does not sprout up on its own. No, it is produced from a vine. God created you, made your body and soul together in your mother's womb. He gave you physical life, and cares for you day in and day out, just like God the Father, the Gardener, did for his vineyard in our first Bible reading from Isaiah.

The Great "I AM" gave you spiritual life also. How? Jesus said, "You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you." (verse 3) Jesus spoke these words the first time to his 11 disciples (Judas had already left) on the night before he would go to the cross, showing the greatest love for them by laying down his life for his friends. Yes, friends. They were not called servants or slaves, but friends who knew what their friend was doing for them and what he was going to continue to do for them. Jesus and his disciples would be physically separated, but they would remain spiritually connected because they had already come to believe in Jesus as their Savior through his words – how he as God and Man lived for them perfectly and now was sacrificing his life to take away their sins. This word, this message, of Jesus connected them to him, like branches to a vine, giving them life. The same is true for us. We are branches connected to the Vine of Jesus, already cleaned, made pure, holy, all sin wiped away forever by the Vine.

What's also so amazing about being a branch connected to Jesus is that I didn't form the connection; he formed me and formed that connection to me without any of my effort. Jesus said, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last." (verse 16a) The branch does not connect to the vine because it bears fruit. It doesn't grow up out of the ground all on its own, make some fruit, and then jump on to the vine. The branch bears fruit because it is connected to the vine. Many in this world will tell you that there is something that you have to do to get connected to the Vine, to the Great "I AM." But Jesus tells us that it can't work that way. No, it works organically. Since Jesus connected to us and made us clean by his Word, we naturally bear fruit because we are attached to his life source, his power, his perfection, his forgiveness.

As branches connected to the Vine, we bear fruit. We do things because we are nourished and powered by Jesus. What does that fruit look like? Jesus said, "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you." (verse 13) Love other people as Jesus loved you. Put others ahead of yourself. Consider how you can serve them without thinking about what you will get out of it. This kind of

love, this fruit, is sweet. It brings us joy to bear this fruit. It makes a difference to love as Christ loved us, and only Christ can fuel that kind of selfless love.

Sadly, as we also heard in our first Bible reading from Isaiah, the people of Israel did not remain in the Great "I AM"'s word and they did not keep his commands. They bore only bad fruit. So many of those branches were cut off and thrown into the fire. They did not remain in Christ, and so they were condemned to hell.

What does our fruit look like? Do I love as Christ loved me? Do I even consider laying down my life for a friend, dying for them? Would I suffer the coronavirus so that someone else didn't have to? Would I wear a mask out in the grocery store or at church even if I thought it was stupid and unnecessary because I was thinking of how to love others instead of loving myself? Would I encourage someone to stay at home and worship online even though I want to see them here at church next weekend? Will I give up a handshake if it means helping keep someone be safe? Or would I actually extend that hand or give someone a hug because this person needs that physical contact – virus or not? Me, as a pastor, will I offer communion so that you can taste and see that the Lord is good and that all your sins are drenched in the blood of Jesus knowing that I may very well breathe germs on you?

We wrestle with how to apply the words of the Vine into our lives and selflessly love others. Since we are sinful from conception, we are inclined towards selfishness - what I want, what I need, how people can serve me - instead of thinking first of how I can serve others, and, like Jesus, lay down my life for them – and to do this not just my friends, but even for my enemies. Am I being self-centered? Am I bearing bad fruit? If so, will I be cut off from God? Will he really do that to me? Has he done it to me already?

We are all guilty of bearing bad fruit. This is why we needed God to cleanse us by his Word, which he did by making us a branch connected to the Great "I AM" Vine. Because of this, we can also see where the Vine has produced good fruit of selfless love in us, following Christ's command. I thank God that I have seen your good fruit throughout this pandemic and am seeing it even more so as so many people are volunteering to help in so many different ways as we get ready to resume worshiping in person again: to help sanitize, usher, run technology, donate items – all of it. You are showing that selfless love of how you can serve others instead of asking, "How can you all serve me?"

But that's not the end all and be all of being a branch connected to the Vine – just looking back on the good fruit that the Vine has produced in you and deciding that you've done enough. No, because God the Father is our Gardener, "He cuts off every branch in [Jesus] that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful." (verse 2) The Father prunes you. He cuts you. It hurts. He promises to hurt you. But the reason for the pruning cannot be lost. He does it to benefit you, to make you more fruitful. This is an on-going process for all of us branches connected to the Vine.

What is God pruning out of your life? Nothing like a pandemic with an organism that you can't see with the naked eye and may pass and infect people without even knowing it to humble you, make you realize how little control you have in this world, let alone your life. Has God been pruning pride out of you? Your self-reliance and sense of control? Has he been pruning your time management? Pruning how you use your mobile devices or the internet? Has he been pruning how you consider other people?

God the Father as the Gardener prunes you, cuts out the bad, to make you more fruitful, but it hurts. It hurts to cut things out of our lives. Yet, he does it because it is better for us. He does not neglect us or resign himself to letting us just bear bad fruit and withering away to eventually be tossed into the fire, disconnected from the Vine. No, he works on us to keep us connected to the Vine and to keep us fruitful. The same care that God exercised in creating us he still exercises as he prunes us. It's always done with the greatest amount of love and selflessness because he is the Great "I AM."

The Great "I AM" has connected you to him, made you clean, caused you to bear fruit, and prunes you to keep you healthy and connected to him. Now, remain in him by remaining in his Word, in all these wonderful truths of what the Great "I AM" does for you, that he showed you the greatest love by laying down his life for you to connect you to him. Remain in his Word – whether here in this building or at home. As you remain in him, you will be pruned but you also will bear fruit – fruit that will last – as you love others as the Great "I AM" loves you. The Great "I AM" will continue to nourish you and keep you healthy in him unto life everlasting. It is great being a branch connected to the Great "I AM" Vine. Amen.