



John 15:1-8
So That You May Believe: John
“Branching Out”

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January 15th, 2023

This last Wednesday night I was thinking about today’s passage as I was trying to fall asleep and the thought popped into my mind that this really is one of people’s favorite passages, particularly because of one verse. But I wasn’t totally sure about that. So, Thursday morning I came to church pondering this and wandered into Paul’s office to say hello. I told him my main task that day was writing the sermon, which is what I usually do on Thursdays. And I said that we’re looking at John 15:1-8, which he already knew because he’d picked out songs for today based on the passage but, you know...I wanted *him* to know that *I* knew what I was preaching on.

And I mentioned that this is the passage where Jesus says that he’s the vine and his disciples are the branches. And Paul immediately said, “I love that passage!” And I immediately thought: “Bingo! You just confirmed my suspicion, and you just became a sermon illustration!” 😊 I find people’s love of this passage ironic, because it’s also a very challenging passage. In fact, one author says that John 15 is “powerful but somewhat disturbing.” And I think that’s very true about the 8 verses we’re looking at this morning as we continue in our sermon series on John. So, let’s turn to **John 15:1-8**. This is God’s Word to you and me this morning.

(Sermon Graphic) Now, you may recall that last week’s passage ended with Jesus inviting his disciples to “rise up” and head on out. They’re leaving the borrowed room where they’ve been for the Passover meal throughout John 13 and 14, and they’re headed toward the Garden of Gethsemane. So, John 15, 16 and 17 continue Jesus’ final directives and assurances to the disciples, as they’re walking.

And Jesus says that he is the “true vine.” This metaphor of “the vine” occurs a number of times in the Old Testament, in reference to Israel. For instance, in Jeremiah 2:21 God speaks through the prophet, “**I planted you [Israel] as a choice vine...**” (**Jeremiah 2:21**). The metaphor is also used in Psalm 80, Hosea 10, Ezekiel 15, and Isaiah 5. Also, Jesus tells a parable about a vine

and vineyard in Mark 12, where the vine clearly represents Israel. So, this is a familiar metaphor for Israel, God's chosen people.

But frequently in the Old Testament we see this vine not producing fruit. It's not doing its job. In fact, that Jeremiah verse in its entirety reads, **"I planted you as a choice vine, from the purest stock. How then did you turn degenerate and become a wild vine?" (Jeremiah 2:21)**. So, in today's passage, Jesus makes this very bold claim, in one of his famous "I am" statements, that he is the *"true vine."* Like Israel, Jesus is the choice vine, from the purest stock. Unlike the vine of Israel, Jesus is incorruptible, unyielding, and will bear fruit.

And then Jesus adds that God the Father is the gardener. We might call him the Master Gardener. And his goal is to have fruit born on the branches of this vine. So, the Master Gardener cuts off branches that are connected to him but don't bear fruit...and even those that do bear fruit get pruned so they will be more fruitful. So, his encouragement to them, and to us, is this, **"Remain in me, as I also remain in you" (John 5:4)**. That's the verse that people latch onto that gives them such good vibes about this passage.

Jesus' disciples want to do that: We long to be connected to Jesus. We often think of this connection through the lens of Jesus protecting us and sheltering us...of sustaining us in difficult times. And there is that element here, right? I mean who wants to be cut off? So, we remain in him. In verse 6 Jesus goes into more detail about the branches that don't remain in him, and which are cut off, and he says they wither and die and are cast into the fire. This is the "disturbing" part of this passage as I mentioned earlier. There's lots of power in this passage, too, as I said: When we're connected to Jesus, he bears fruit through us. That's powerful! But the consequences of *not* remaining in him, and therefore him not remaining in us, are steep. And think about this: as he's saying this, Judas Iscariot is literally before the authorities betraying Jesus. I imagine that Jesus very much has that in mind as he says these words.

This last week, my daughter, Brooke, was apparently cut off from the family by our dog. I was in our bedroom when I heard her yell out, "Dad! Oooohhh...grosss! Dad come here!" I ran in to see her lying on the ground in

our bonus room, JD standing next to her, and Waverly, the dog, running away from the whole scene. Well, as Brooke said later, in a “targeted attack” Waverly walked right up to her and threw up all over Brooke’s neck and upper chest. It slid down the side of her neck to the ground, where it got in her hair, which actually is good news because her hair kept it all from getting on the carpet. So, praise God for that, right?

And, fortunately for her and for all of us this morning, I had the presence of mind to take a photo before I cleaned her up. That’s what good parents do, right? So, there you go. Dog food chunks on her neck and to the right of her head on the floor. You can thank me later. 😊 Anyway, in this “targeted attack” it was as if Waverly was saying, “I’m done with you. You’re cut off.” And that’s not where we want to be. By the way, here’s a picture of the **offending dog**: I mean, she’s so cute...maybe it was actually some strange sign of affection (?).



The point is, being cut off from the vine because we’re not bearing fruit is not a good place to be. Instead, we want to remain in Jesus. It’s a safe place to be. And that safety is attractive, which is why I think this passage, particularly this verse 4, is so popular. **We want to know and be reminded of the fact that when we’re connected to Jesus – when we remain in him, when we abide in him – that we are safe.** And then the other subconsciously attractive thing about this is that this word “remain” communicates a lack of movement. I mean, if I tell one of my kids to “remain” in his or her room, the idea is that they don’t move from that space. You stay still. Don’t do anything, don’t go anywhere. And that feeds into our consumer mentality and whatever tendencies toward laziness we have, because remaining in one place is easier than moving around. Watching a marathon is *way* easier than running one. Listening to a symphony is *way* easier than playing one. This is why new year’s resolutions fail so frequently: It’s just a lot easier to remain on the couch than it is to do stuff.

So, I believe: **This passage (verse 4, especially) is a favorite one because “remaining in Jesus” sounds warm and fuzzy, comforting, and quite**

frankly: kind of passive. It makes you want to build a fire in the fireplace, cuddle up in front of it with your dog napping at your feet (not throwing up)...and meditate on Jesus and his word, so we'd passively "remain in" him more. That's kind of what we've turned this into. And obviously, there's nothing wrong with studying Scripture. We should absolutely do that. But let's remember that: The purpose of studying Scripture is to nourish us and strengthen our connection to the true vine (Jesus) *so that* we'd bear fruit for the Master Gardener (our Heavenly Father).

If you're connected to Jesus, if you're connected to the true vine, then you're a branch on that vine. And our job is to produce fruit. And not only that, but: **God prunes us for the purpose of bearing fruit.** I've had the meniscus in each of my knees pruned...and it *is* painful. You're knocked out for the surgery so you don't feel it then...but post-surgery, you're on pain medications, things are sore. And spiritually, with the pruning that God does to us branches is much the same. It is oftentimes not comfortable, or warm and fuzzy. But it produces more fruit. And God does it for that purpose, which is better than being disconnected from the vine.

So, two things in regards to this passage to take away. First: **If you're not connected to the vine, if you're not connected to Jesus: then, what are you waiting for?** There's death-defeating, eternal-life power in Jesus that can change you starting right here and now. You access that power when you get connected to him...when you remain in him. I invite you to become grafted onto the true vine this morning, if you aren't already.

Second, if you're connected to him, God the Master Gardener will prune you. He does this so we would bear fruit for him. And then he'll prune you some more. And then you'll bear more fruit. And on it goes. **This pruning is needed in our lives to rid us of sin, shame, guilt, pride, anger, bitterness, fear, and so forth. Those are the kinds of things that get pruned.** I think a lot of people stay away from Jesus because they see us Christians and think the things that they find fun and enjoyable in life will get pruned. They look at us Christians and unfortunately, they see uninspiring, "un-fun" lives. That's a problem. Now it could be that certain things we do that feel fun *need*

to get pruned, like pornography, lust, greed, addictions, and rooting for the San Francisco 49ers (Kidding on that last one!).

But there's a lot in life we can keep on doing that's all kinds of fun. And so the pruning we often need is in regards to our approach to those things; **The pruning is in our attitude toward them, in seeing those things as God sees them: as opportunities to bear fruit.** For instance, let's say you're at your kid's basketball game 30 minutes early because that's when he/she needs to be there. What do you do with that time? Sit on your phone and scroll through social media? Read a magazine? Look all holy and read your Bible? Or do we see it as a gospel opportunity to cultivate relationships that might bear fruit at that moment or at least plant seeds that might bear fruit later?

Our family had that chance this last week when one of our son's teammates ended up in the hospital. I called the dad to see how his son was, and after listening for several minutes, I asked if my family could pray for his son. He was really glad to have us do that. That happened because I'd built a relationship with him on the sidelines of the games over a season and a half. God has pruned my attitude to try and build relationships in that context (on the sidelines of kids' games, practices, etc.) so that Kingdom fruit might be born. **(Sermon Graphic)**

Let me give one more example and then we'll wrap this up. So, as most of you know, I am an assistant band director for just a few hours a week in the LWSD's before school elementary band program. About 10 days ago, as kids were coming into the band room, one of my 4th grade students randomly piped up, "We understand our purpose when we get older and near the end of life and can look back on what we've done." It was kind of stunning. I don't know what prompted him to say this; it was totally out of the blue. And then he said, "Mr. North, you probably know your purpose, don't you?" And I thought, "Does he think I'm near the end of my life?" And this was like 5 days before I turned 50, so I was a little extra self-conscious about this.

I said, "I do know what my purpose is." He replied, "To teach kids music?" And I said, "Actually, no." That caught him off-guard. After a few awkward

seconds, he said, “So, what’s your purpose?” Let me remind you, this is a public school I teach in. So, I kind of paused, took a bit of a deep breath, and I said, “Well, to be honest, I think my purpose is to live, now and forever, in relationship with God.” I suppose I could have been a little less generic, and more explicit, and said “...with Jesus”. But it wasn’t all *that* long ago that I probably would not have answered like I did; not because I didn’t believe what I said, but I wouldn’t have had the courage. Fear would have taken over. That fear needed pruning from my life so I’d bear fruit in conversations with people who don’t know Jesus. And maybe he does know him, I don’t know. But statistically speaking, out of the 20 students who were there by the end of the conversation, most aren’t, and they all heard me say this.

I’m not saying God’s done pruning me or that I’m perfect at doing this; but those are a couple examples of pruning in my life. First, in regards to my attitude about my time, because my natural inclination on the sidelines waiting for a game to start is to focus on myself and kind of ignore other people. Second, in regards to fear, so I’d be open and honest about my faith.

You see, besides obvious sin that we can more easily recognize, the pruning most of us probably need is *not* to cut from our lives enjoyable things we do – like our jobs or our recreational activities or whatever. There *could* be some things that need to be let go of, like if those things have become idols in our lives...but for most of us: **The pruning we need is to be “transformed by the renewing of our minds” (Romans 12:2) to see how every day moments, conversations, and relationships can be used by God to bear fruit for Him.** So I hope this passage remains one of your favorites, but with a desire not just for the safety of “remaining in Jesus” but also for the pruning that comes with being connected to him, so that we’d bear fruit. We need selfishness, uncertainty, pride, fear, and more cut off so that where we live, where we work, and where we play might be places where we would bear fruit. It all starts with being connected to the true vine, to Jesus. We “can’t do anything” (verse 5: meaning, can’t do any fruit-bearing) for him if we aren’t connected to him. And then, as we remain in him, and he in us, we branch out, bearing fruit for the Master Gardener. Let’s pray...Amen.