

John 15:1-11

Have you ever been in a vineyard? What images do you have in your memory about a vineyard? When I drove passed the Tri Cities I saw many beautiful rows of grape vines. The fields were wide and full of fruit, and made me realize how much the grapes produce for us every year. It amazed me when I saw it. You can picture the rows of grape plants entwined with their supports of twisting trunks laden with branches of grapes. Can we relate this image with the question: what is the condition of being a disciple of Jesus Christ? How can we bear much fruit that Jesus asked of his disciples?

Let's imagine that you are on a ship to explore and travel to a far place. Then suddenly a terrible wind comes up and you find yourself in a strong storm. You become the only survivor of this storm. You are able to grasp a piece of the broken ship and drift to an unknown island. It is a deserted island in a tropical area. There is an abundance of fruit, flowers and fresh water, and you are amazed at all the beauty. There are also many caves where various animals live for protection. Physically, there are no problems for surviving there. There is only one problem: you are the only one there, and no one knows where you are. From now on, you will spend the rest of your life on that isolated island. What do you think about living in this paradise, on this beautiful island? Maybe if you have been having difficulties relating to people at this time, you would enjoy escaping to such an isolated place for at least a month. But if you had to live on that island for the rest of your life, what would you think?

Maybe that kind of life of isolation even in a paradise would not be enjoyable after a few months. Why? There are no more relationships for joys or concerns with other people. You would not be challenged to grow or love or forgive others. You might have quietness and peace, but it would be hollow with no human relationships with the joys or concerns. In preparing his disciples for his upcoming death and resurrection, Jesus told them this story about the vine and the branches in the vineyard as a metaphor of the relationship with God and with each other as His disciples. What are the challenges of following Him as his disciples now and in the future in this passage? In my experience, talking to those whose lives will soon end, they are mainly concerned with their relationship to others. They aren't concerned with any other things, such as money or possessions like: "I should have purchased the house or opened that business" or, "I should have been promoted to the position". The real things that concerned them were

their relationships with their family members and those whom they' re deeply involved with.

Jesus wanted to show his disciples and us too, the importance of our interrelatedness and our relationships to each other. Our true value as a human being depends on how we relate to others. The person on a beautiful island may have "everything" , but they will miss the real meaning of life since there is no one to relate to. In this metaphor of the vine and the branches, first, we learn that by being connected to God is the first necessary step to bear fruit. Without this connection we cannot bear fruit, and we are like a discarded branch. How much in our everyday life do we value above all, our relationship to God in Christ? True discipleship is focused on an authentic relationship with God. This passage is very clear about this entwining with God. The grapevine is unique because it is different than other trees. The vines grow intertwined with each other. So Jesus taught them the nature of discipleship. It is having a close entwined relationship with God, and we can see for ourselves how close and how entwined the grapevine and the branches are in order to bear fruit. Jesus chose this metaphor of the grape plant because it demonstrates this entwining relationship with God. This is the first step in becoming a disciple of Christ, being entwined with God. Our relationship with God continues to grow with worship, meditation time in the Word of God, listening and obeying what God tells us to do.

The branches also are connected to each other and each one is needed to bear fruit, and there is none better than any other. We are all valuable in God' s sight. He bought us all with his own precious blood, no matter what our station in life is. This is how He wants his disciples to live and connect together as His beloved children.

There was a large famous monastery where many monks lived and prayed to God. But as they grew older, they died off, and in the end only ten monks remained with sorrow because the monastery couldn' t function any more. One day a Jewish rabbi came and built a small house near the monastery. The rabbi meditated a lot and the monks were observing him. Finally one of the monks came and shared his sorrow and the problems of the monastery with him and asked for his advice. After a while the rabbi came and told him, "The Messiah is living among you." The Monk returned to the monastery and called a meeting of the other nine monks and told them what the rabbi had said. They looked at each other and wondered which one of them was the Messiah? It seemed to be a riddle to them.

But as time went by, they began showing more love and respect to each other, and gradually the mood of the monastery changed. A different atmosphere developed, and visitors who came noticed it too. They said, "The Messiah is surely among them. There is peace, love, and respect among them". In the same way, the atmosphere of a church cannot be changed simply by programs. As we love each person and other people as we love ourselves, the church cannot help but be changed. In the place where we are loved and love others, we experience God's presence among us. There is no method, no program, and no technology that can make up for lack of love and true connectedness with people.

In today's world many scholars are concerned about our isolated lives and disconnectedness with others real lives. What is lacking is any authentic connectedness with people. Bearing much fruit comes from a healthy connection with each other and with God. Plants need the right climate to grow and so do churches. The right climate for making disciples to be produced is an atmosphere of acceptance and deep connectedness with each other in love. Be nice and friendly to people. Show your love and acceptance with handshakes hugs and smiles. I learned many ways to hug on the left or right side. I've had many hugs since I came to this church. There were many lipstick marks on my shoulder's areas because of your many friendly hugs. When I saw them, I knew I was loved, and I'm glad that we are a loving church. This is the most important resource for bearing much fruit.

Look at our world. Our world is filled with lonely people who are starving for the affirmation of a loving touch and approval. Hugs and shaking hands and a smile and greeting, with love are the expressions of God's love in practical ways. Tender words and caring touches will make all the difference in the world to someone. A simple expression of love may heal someone's struggles with pain or fear. This is the living dynamic in our lives that supersedes any supposed paradise on an isolated island. Jesus is teaching us in this passage that to be a disciple is to focus on loving connectedness in this world. I am very thankful for your loving works in this church connecting with people's lives.

Today, after our service, women's group will make a "pass it on lunch" in order to share God's love to other families, especially children with needs. With your donated money we will give them Christmas gifts and toys. This "pass it on meal system" was begun by Joe Iwano. He passed away last week, but his spirit of connecting with others in need will continue. I appreciate your passion and energy to entwine with those around us who are in need with your support in our emergency

feeding program, Mary' s place, the women' s shelter and parent night out. Today is pledge Sunday, thank you for your loving hearts and spirit of being entwined with others and this world, as you offer your time, treasure and talents. I am deeply moved by your generosity and your loving hearts to keep alive for this body of Christ and for the ministry of God in this community.

There are many trees but Jesus chose the example of the grapevine. You know, the branches of the vine cannot be used for furniture or homebuilding. They are too thin, weak and curvy. The only purpose of the grapevine is to produce grapes through connectedness. The only reason the grapevine exists is to make grapes fruits. It cannot be used for any other purpose. If a branch is torn off, like I saw once, it becomes dry and it cannot be used for anything. This is why Jesus chose this plant as His good example for being and making disciples: we are to produce good fruit through the connectedness. We have to try to build up the bridges of love to connect with the various cultures, values, styles and the isolated life of those around us who are different. Love can overcome our fears and misgivings towards others who are different than us; the handicapped, the shut ins, the needy and those who believe differently than we do.

Paul who received an unlimited amount of God' s love made the bridge between the Jew and Gentile who could not find common ground. There was much fruit produced in this bridge which he made with the Gentiles. As a disciple of Christ we need to build up our ability to connect with those around us. Please keep this metaphor of the vine and the branches with their entwined relationship, and practice this principle to make the church healthy in order to produce healthy fruit, and make good Disciples of Christ. As we imagine the wide fields of grapevines and think of this church, let' s have a vision of bearing good fruit in this church as we entwine in love to God and love for each other.

