

Tracy Daub
7/28/19--University Presbyterian Church
John 15:1-11

THE 'I AM' STATEMENTS: I AM THE TRUE VINE

When Denise, the church's Administrative Assistant, died over a year ago, we were shocked, saddened, and grieved. She was such a vital part of our church life and we greatly missed her. A sudden death like hers can leave people in a state of disbelief. My disbelief not only related to the unexpectedness of her death but also with the immediate and permanent severing of all forms of communication with her. In the days and weeks following her death I confronted multiple kinds of problems in the office about where to find something or who to contact to manage a certain problem, or where she had filed some piece of information on the computer and I had such a hard time reconciling that there was no way to ask Denise. It seemed hard to believe that in this age of email, texting, facebook, instagram, facetime, and basic phone calls that there was really no way I could contact Denise to say hi or ask a simple question. Death severed those connections forever. Maybe you have felt that way after the death of a loved one. Death brings such finality to our physical relationship with another and to all forms of communication with that person. It involves a permanent severing that no communications tech giant can overcome.

In the passage we read today, Jesus knows he is going to die and he tries to prepare his followers for the moment when he will no longer be with them and they will profoundly feel his absence. He knows that following his death his disciples will feel cut off from him, as if a very part of their own bodies had been severed. And so Jesus reminds them of something very essential: he tells them that they will always be connected to him. He says to them "I am the vine, you are the branches." Jesus reinforces the ongoing connection his followers, including us,

will have with him even after his death. He tells them, "Abide in me as I abide in you."

Branches cannot exist apart from the vine. Branches are connected to the vine and have life because they abide in the vine. And Jesus tells his disciples that *he* is that vine, that source of life, to whom his followers are connected.

This is yet another one of Jesus' 'I Am' statements from the Gospel of John, statements where Jesus makes a claim about himself in order to support and instruct his followers in the faith. Jesus states here in these instructions to his followers that, "Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." In other words, Jesus is not only offering comfort to his followers that they will remain connected to him after his death, but he is also teaching all of us followers what is necessary to bear fruit in this life. That's what grapevines are all about, right? Grapevines are intended to bear fruit. And so it is with us. To bear fruit in this life, Jesus says we must abide in him, be connected to him.

But what is this fruit we produce? What kind of fruit is Jesus talking about? The Protestant work-ethic has instilled within us and the general American society the value of productivity. And so we work ourselves to exhaustion, and strive to get ahead, and be *productive*. The fruits we are taught to produce come in a variety of forms: wealth, career success, personal achievements, education, good manners, a nice home, and a new car.

Do you ever find yourself comparing your fruit to what you see others produce? High school and college class reunions are prime "fruit comparing" events, aren't they? If you've ever been to one you will know that everybody is sizing up everybody else, looking to see who never amounted to much and who turned out to be a surprising success. Funerals are another occasion when we are prompted to compare fruit--when we read the glowing obituary and hear the eulogies of praise for the deceased's accomplishments. And we start thinking, "What do I have

to show for my life? What have I achieved? What kind of salary do I make? How big is my home? What kind of school do my kids attend? How strong is my marriage? And all this comparing of fruit begins to make us dissatisfied with our lives.

Jesus wants us to produce fruit all right. But not the kind of fruit society claims is important. It's pretty clear in this passage what kind of fruit Jesus wants us to produce: it is love. Love is the fruit. Jesus tells his followers, "abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept the Father's commandments and abide in his love." And Jesus adds, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

The love Jesus is speaking about is not a sentimental love. Rather it is a steadfast, enduring, committed, determined kind of love. It is a love that is found when we forgive a wrong, when we help a neighbor, when we support the stranger and the immigrant, when we speak up for what is just. This kind of love is not an easy love but one that requires determination.

Jesus says that when we are truly connected to him, the life-giving power of God will flow into us branches and we will bear fruit, the fruits of love. This kind of fruit takes many forms. Sometimes the fruit of love looks like generosity to a homeless person or in giving time to stocking a food pantry shelf. And sometimes it looks like striving to forgive the one who bitterly betrayed or hurt you. Sometimes the fruit of love may come through writing letters to a member of Congress or joining a protest march. Or maybe the fruit of love may take the form of a casserole made for a neighbor in need. Sometimes the fruits of love are as large and wondrous as a watermelon. But other times, the fruit of love may be an act of kindness as small as a kumquat, so little it may be barely noticed among all the produce the marketplace of the world generates: the greed and anger and hatred and selfishness and division that leaves us deflated and

feeling overwhelmed and discouraged. But do not doubt what the vine grower is doing with our efforts big and small. We might not even see the fruits of our efforts. Our job is not to be distracted by productivity but to stay focused on the vine, on being connected to the vine. Because when we stay connected to Jesus and his way, then his power flows through us branches and produces love in ways we cannot foresee.

Lila Bauman writes about how her neighbor Helen brings her bags of sweet peaches from the tree in her yard when they are in season. One day Helen's husband Earl told Lila the story of that tree's origins. Earl's friend, Mr. Garcia, lived in a nursing home. One day when eating canned peaches in the nursing home, Mr. Garcia bit into a peach pit. Fortunately, he didn't break a tooth. But instead of complaining, Mr. Garcia asked for an empty coffee can and asked someone to fill it with soil. And he pushed the pit into the soil and set the can on his window sill. "Amazingly, the pit sprouted and the plant thrived. Eventually it outgrew the can. Mr. Garcia asked Earl to take his little tree and plant it in the ground, which Earl did, in his own backyard. The sprout grew into a spindly tree, and within a couple of years it produced a few peaches. Soon after, a spring hailstorm broke the tree apart and it died. But by then Earl had taken pits from some of the tree's few peaches and planted them by the fence. And one of those pits sprouted into a tree, healthier and taller than the original." That tree, the daughter of Mr. Garcia's original tree, produced an abundance of sweet peaches each year. So, thinking of Mr. Garcia, Lila took three bags of peaches to a nursing home so the residents "could enjoy the fruit Mr. Garcia dreamed of." She writes that, "Mr. Garcia did not live to see his peach pit grow into the tree that ultimately produced this harvest. But when he looked at that pit years ago he saw the promise of fresh fruit. It didn't matter to him that the pit had already been canned and forgotten, or that he would never see where his gamble would lead. "Who despises the day of small

things?" asks the prophet Zechariah. It's in those small things that the promise of the future rests."

It is not easy to remain connected to the vine. We are inclined at times to disconnect and give ourselves over to producers of very different kinds of fruit. Some will tell us to trust in the power of weapons and guns. Or we will amass as much material wealth and goods as we can to feel good about ourselves and safer for our future. Or we will accept the message that some people matter less than others. Or we will fall into despair and hopelessness over our lives and our world. The marketplace of the world does not produce fruits that sustain life or hope. Only the vine. Only the vine and the way of love.

And so we pray, O Lord, let us not be remembered or defined by the times we have disconnected from the vine: by our impatience when someone needed our help, by our rudeness to another, by our callous disregard of suffering, by our selfishness, by our willingness to go along with evil and hatred and injustice. Instead, Holy One, teach us to cling to the vine, to remain connected to the source of life and to let you produce in us the fruits of love.