

Sermon for April 29, 2018

“The Jesus Connection”

John 15:1-8

"It's not what you know, it's who you know." Have you ever heard that saying before? Sometimes it is used as a pessimistic remark about favoritism in high places. But when applied to spiritual matters, it has a different sound. We could never know enough to pass any theology test devised by God. So, all God requires is that we know his Son: Jesus. Getting into heaven or finding spiritual fulfillment in this life is not about what you know, but who you know. It's all about the Jesus connection.

In a sense that is what the parable of the vine tells us. However, it goes beyond that. It not only says that we must have a relationship with Jesus. It describes what kind of relationship. It tells us our place and role as well as God's place and role. It also tells us how Jesus fits into it all

Jesus' little discourse about the vine and the branches is an extended metaphor that has three parts to it. First there is God who is the farmer, the caretaker of the vine. Then there is Jesus, who is the main part of the vine. And finally, there are the branches, which are the followers of Jesus.

But what does it all mean?

First let's consider God: the vine grower. The role of the vine grower is to care for the vine so that it is able to produce fruit. Jesus says that every branch that bears no fruit he removes. Such branches simply sap energy from the branches that are producing fruit, so God removes them and throws them in the trash heap. There were a lot of fruitless branches on God's vine in Jesus' day. Many of the Sadducees and the Pharisees were not serving God, and they were among the ones that God would cut off.

So, if God cuts off the fruitless branches God must pamper the fruitful ones, right? Wrong! Jesus says that God "prunes" the fruitful branches. Ouch! What's the difference between pruning and removing? As I studied this passage I discovered that apparently to care for a grape vine one has to prune it. If the branches are not pruned, they produce little or no fruit. However, if they are properly pruned they produce much fruit. In the next verse Jesus says that you have already been "cleansed" by the word I have spoken to you. There is a play on words here. The same word is used for both "prune" and "cleanse" in the Greek: *kathaire* (καθαίρει). So, through Jesus' teachings we are being pruned so we can bear fruit. Have you ever read the Bible or heard it preached and felt a twinge of pain from it? Maybe it spoke to your heart about some way that you were not serving God as you should. When that happens to some people they think, "Well I must not have been a very good Christian, or I wouldn't be feeling convicted of that sin or lack of faith." On the contrary, if you were unfruitful you would not feel that twinge. You would have cut yourself off from God and your heart would have been hardened to the Spirit convicting you. But because you feel that twinge God is pruning you to make you more fruitful. The fact that the Spirit is working on your heart proves that you must be producing fruit for God. It also shows that God foresees you producing more fruit!

It is like a parent who places demands on a child. The parent makes the child study and do their homework. The parent makes the child take responsibilities. Many times, the child doesn't like it, but it is done in love. If the parent cared less they would not train or discipline the child at all. In the same way God loves us and sometimes that love includes telling us we are wrong or allowing circumstances to change our lives. God does not want to hurt us. God simply wants to cleanse us of those things that are keeping us from producing more fruit.

That is God's role in caring for the vine, but what about the vine and its branches? Jesus said, "I am the true vine." The purpose of the vine is to carry water and nutrients to the branches. Without those nutrients the branches would die. They need what the vine supplies to live and to grow and to make fruit.

Jesus also said, "you are the branches." "Abide in me and I in you, just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me." (15:4) Without the water of life and the spiritual nourishment that Jesus provides, we would die. We need Jesus, the vine, to provide those things. That is the Jesus connection.

And what do we need those things for? To bear much fruit! What does this fruit look like? Some people think Jesus is speaking only of leading people to Christ. And that is part, but it is much more. The Old Testament uses the image of Israel as a vine that God transplanted and built a vineyard for. (Jer. 2:21) It was supposed to produce justice and righteousness. God's purpose for Israel was to be an example of holiness to the nations. The New Testament speaks of the fruit of the Spirit being: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." (Gal. 5:22-23) These are the things that our lives should produce because of being in Christ.

So, living the Christian life is all about the Jesus Connection. Are you connected? Do you have an uplink to God? I'm serious! Without it we're dead. Jesus's cute little parable here says that without it we will be cut off.

If you answer "yes, I am connected," then where is your fruit? Do you find the fruits of the Spirit in your life? Are you an example of God's justice and righteousness? Do you have love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control? If not, look out because the cosmic shears are coming.

If we are truly honest with ourselves, we would probably all say "yes and no." Sometimes there are parts of our lives that are dead wood. Places in our hearts that are not producing these fruits. God needs to prune those. Yes, it will hurt, but it will enable us to bear more fruit.

Jesus said he is the vine and we are the branches. And he came that we may be filled with the joy of the Spirit. Seek to abide in him that he may abide in you and give you joy!