

John 15:1-8 - "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, and I will 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 a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup>If anyone does not remain in me, he is 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 given you. <sup>8</sup>This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

## *Remain in me*

*So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.*

*(Colossians 2:6-7)*

Connections are important. The old saying rings true – “It’s not *what* you know, it’s *who* you know!” Since time immemorial, people have been leveraging personal relationships and connections into job opportunities, special favors, or financial support. Did you ever apply for a job, but get overlooked in favor of the boss’ son? Did you ever get shortchanged on playing time, because the coach’s niece needed a few more minutes on the court? Have you ever found yourself running into a brick wall professionally, because your less than stellar coworker knows somebody on the company board of directors? Now, not all connections we make are self-serving examples of nepotism like those. We’ve got connections all over the place – a spouse, a child, a circle of friends. Being in a relationship with these people brings us joy – we’ve got a support system of people who encourage us and we, in turn, encourage them. Connections are important, but isn’t it usually the case that we don’t really sense how important connections are until they’re gone? The child loses a parent, and suddenly there’s a void that wasn’t there before. The connection is severed. A friend walks away from you, and leaves you searching for a missing piece that you weren’t even aware was missing until just now. Sometimes, we don’t really grasp the value of the connection until it’s gone.

So how about Jesus’ disciples – how do you think they were feeling? There they were, in the upper room on Maundy Thursday evening, and everything Jesus had been telling them for three years about his suffering and death was finally coming home to roost – it was happening. In a matter of hours, Jesus would endure the wrath of God against the sin of the world, and die. So, as he looked around the upper room on that Thursday night, gazing into the candlelit faces of his fearful followers on the eve of his death, what could he say, what picture could he use? By the next afternoon, their connection would be severed. But Jesus comforts them with an image that would assure his downcast disciples that not even death would sever the connection he had with them. **I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.** What a thing to say, mere hours before his death – **remain in me.** Through faith in Jesus, their connection to him would never be severed.

The same is true of you. Whether it was first through your baptism or through the good news of the gospel, by the gift of God’s Holy Spirit, you have a connection to Jesus, the true Vine, through faith. Why do you suppose Jesus added that detail – I am the **true** vine? Because by nature each one of us looks and longs to make a connection with any other vine. We get connected to all the wrong things, thinking they’ll bring us meaning, joy, peace, and happiness. The true Vine extends his gospel invitation, **Remain in me**, but I’m going to try something else for a while. What is it for you – some connection that you think will bring you a meaningful, fruitful life? Well, we’re creatures of imitation, so we look at the world around us – what do they value? What brings their lives meaning? So I immerse myself in my work, thinking that if I can get a little further ahead, then I’ll actually have a purpose. Maybe I sink my roots into my family, and have the all-too temporary joy of being needed...that is until the kids grow up. I plant myself in my hobbies, my sports, the opportunities I try to extend to my kids that I never had. I try to find that special someone who will make me whole, then I’ll be happy and fulfilled. Then my life will be fruitful and meaningful. You can see that none of those things are bad, right? A steady job, a loving family, a hobby or two – not bad. But too often, good things become god things. Or maybe I imitate not so much the world around me, but the church at large and I sink my hopes into the most dangerous connection of all – the connection to myself – what I feel, what I think, what I can do. **Remain in me**, Jesus said, but my sinful nature thinks it can wait a while. We look for a meaningful connection only to find that it leaves us dried out and withered up and disconnected. Jesus said, **If**

**anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.** Because of our sins, that's exactly what we deserved.

We've tried and tried to make a connection that means something, but we only end up failing. That's a depressing thought! But here's some good news for you: The only connection that truly, eternally matters isn't one YOU make at all. It's one that's given to you. **Remain in me**, Jesus said. But in order to *remain* somewhere, you've got to be there already. That's where you are. Through faith, you're connected to the true Vine. **Remain in me**. It would be easy to beat people over the heads with these words, *You better remain in Jesus, you better be better, you better figure it out or else...* but that completely misses the beauty of the picture Jesus uses! When Jesus makes this command, it's not a burdensome thing. It's like holding out a glass of water to a man dying of thirst and saying, "Have some water." It's the kind of thing that makes the believer say, "Oh, of course!" When Jesus makes this command, it's not a burdensome thing; but not because it's easy. Oh my, no! Our sinful nature will fight tooth and nail against every word that comes out of Jesus' mouth. When Jesus makes this command, it's not burdensome because Jesus provides and gives that which he commands. **Remain in me**, Jesus said.

**I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him, he bears much fruit; because apart from me you aren't able to do a thing.** Jesus expects to see fruit from his branches, otherwise, like we said before, they get cut off. Jesus expects fruit, so notice where the fruit comes from – yes, from the branches, but why? Because the branches tried so much harder? Because the branches made positive steps forward in an improved life? Because the branches decided to buckle down and finally commit like they've never committed before? No. The fruit comes from the branches, but why? Always and only because the branches are connected to the vine. What do branches do? Their chief task is to receive what the vine gives, and fruit is the result. Our connection to Christ through faith results in fruits of faith in our lives. What are those? Fruits of faith are anything a believer does in accordance with God's law as a way of thanking God for his gift of full and free salvation. Be sure to keep that order straight – first the forgiveness, then the fruit. In Galatians 5, after giving the most beautiful treatise on how the believer is free from sin and free from trying to save himself through obedience to the law, the Apostle Paul takes us down the produce aisle of the Holy Spirit. He says, **The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.** You have been set free from sin, and set free to love and serve your neighbor with these fruits. Which ones? All of them!

Branches, connected to the vine, produce fruit. It's what branches do. As you're looking for ways to be a fruitful branch, be sure not to cut out off the branch you're sitting on. What I mean is this – when the world things about 'good works,' it usually only praises the big and flashy, never the small and unnoticed. So, sometimes Christians think that in order to actually be the fruitful branch that Christ has declared them to be, they need to run off and perform some great spectacle of kindness for all the world to see. But as you're looking for ways to be a fruitful branch, be sure not to cut off one you're sitting on. Your neighbors are all around you, even under your roof. You have a life at home, at work, at school – ripe with opportunities to bring forth good fruit. But producing good fruit isn't always easy. It's not easy to be loving when nobody around you seems to care about you. Joy and peace don't come so easily when it's my life that's in shambles. Patience is something that's in short supply. Self-control cuts completely against the culture of indulgence all around us. But this is all part of what it means to be a fruitful branch connected to the vine.

Did you notice what Jesus said about all the branches that do bear fruit? **Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.** Have you ever seen a bush or a tree get pruned? Sometimes it looks like they've hacked away so many branches and leaves that this poor plant doesn't have a chance. But wait until spring and watch what happens. With all the suckers removed and the dead wood trimmed away, that tree looks

more vibrant and more fruitful than ever before. Pruning makes branches stronger – it's not always a pleasant process, but it's always for the best. So sometimes he'll hack away at all those fruitless branches in our lives, for what purpose? To harm us? To punish us? No, to prune us. To point us back to his Word. To produce more fruit pleasing to God only through of our connection with the Vine. The world might hate us, try to hurt us, shut us up, shut us down, or try to get a rise out of us – and it hurts. Do you suppose the branches enjoy being pruned by those super sharp scissors? It may not be pleasant, but see it for what it is - it's an opportunity to put those fruits of the Spirit into practice. Because you're a branch connected to Christ, you can respond to hate with love; despair with joy; guilt with peace.

Eight times in eight verses, Jesus said, **Remain in me**. In his grace, he doesn't leave you casting about in the world, trying to figure out what he means by that. Instead, with his gracious invitation, Jesus shows you that remaining in him means receiving all he has to give. He is the vine, you are the branches. Think of the care he's given you – he's watered you with the sacred flood of your baptism. He's fertilized you with his own body and blood for your forgiveness. He's never stopped speaking his word of promise directly to you – growing your faith, strengthening the connection that he's made with you. That's what Jesus told his disciples, **You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you**. This is who you are. This is your present status in Christ, washed clean, so what does that mean? You're a branch, connected to the true Vine. His nourishment sustains you. His power works in you. So what happens? His fruit grows through you.

Connections are important. A different connection in your life might distract you enough so you don't feel so guilty about sin, but it can't take away your sin. A different connection in your life might lead you to think that you're living a "better life," but that other connection can't bring you from death to life. Another connection in your life might make you feel meaningful and purposeful, but those all have a shelf life. That's not the case with the true Vine, Jesus. Forgiveness of sin, eternal life in heaven, and a purpose to life, all more than we could ask or imagine, thanks to our connection with Jesus through faith. Thank God that he's grafted us into the true Vine, and God bless us as we live joyful, fruit-filled lives of thanksgiving to the God who saved us in Christ.

Amen

*To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.*

(Jude 24-25)