

John 15:1 “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. ² He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³ You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in me as I abide 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. ⁵ I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

It is so good when new ideas come along, however and whenever it is that they come along. I feel like I was blessed with a profound new idea, thanks to our Bishop. This idea came from our Annual Conference one week ago, which has had a main theme over the last 4 years, since the arrival of our new Bishop. The theme is actually really simple. It is this teaching from the Gospel of John that is before us this day. I have been hearing this for so long. But I worry about something: could it be that this is again, one of those things that we have heard so many times, that when we hear it, *we don't really hear it?* It is almost like our brains hear something and they partially shut off, because it's like we say to ourselves, “Oh, I've got this already! No more work to do here!” May God protect us from such a thing. When we hear something, we need to really hear it, and understand it. We cannot short-change the process.

I need to play a little bit of a beautiful song for us right now. I have been listening to this song since our son was a baby. This is John Michael Talbot, Roman Catholic monk and singer. Let's hear these words for just a moment; (listen)

I have loved these words for so long. I still love them. But when I look at what Jesus actually says here, it does not exactly match up with the song. The song emphasizes what it is that we always want to hear... we want to hear what God will do for us. We want to hear about the benefit that is coming our way. And we hear it in the song.

I am the Vine, and you are the branches,
live in me, and you will never die...

I am the Vine, and my Father is the Keeper,
come to me, let the Spirit bring you life...

These are such beautiful and soothing words. Like I said, I have always loved these words. But after hearing my Bishop speak last weekend, it has jolted something within me. It has jolted me to actually pay attention. I need to go back and listen to our Bishop. In a way she was at first speaking to all the pastors. But then she stays faithful to the actual words of Jesus, and she looks out at all the people of our Conference, every United Methodist person, and she says what Jesus says: I am the Vine, and you are the branches. And what is your job? To bear good fruit, to bear much fruit. When she spoke Bishop Malone said "YOU ARE

THE BRANCHES!” It was almost like it never made sense to me before. Think about a beautiful grapevine, and sadly the ones burning now in California. Think about how they work. What is the goal of the whole thing? What is the purpose of the whole thing? The goal and the purpose are those plump little purple fruits on the end of the branches. That is the goal. But what is needed for these plump little purple things to happen? There must be **BRANCHES** connected to the **LIVING VINE**. Someone needs to tend the entire living system, and that is God. I went back through these words to count how many times it talks about us getting life because of being connected to the Vine. How many times does it actually focus on that? It actually never mentions that. But since that seems to be where our attention is, well, that ends up being the biggest thing mentioned in a song about this passage!

If we go back and count the actual words, which sometimes we really need to do, if we count the words about fruit and branches, we see those words used 6 times each. Six times it talks about the branches, and 6 times it talks about the goal which is good fruit. Our Bishop shouted it out to us last weekend: **YOU ARE THE BRANCHES! WE ARE THE BRANCHES**. What is our job, our function? It is to play our part, so that good fruit can happen!

I fear that we do not really hear these words of Jesus deeply. Our biggest concern is to hear about how God will care for us. Well friends, we don't have to worry about that. It is automatic. God loves us before we ask. But we cannot let that desire for God's

love and life, we cannot let that block us from hearing something new from the Vineyard. We are the Branches. Yes, we must be connected to the Vine, and that is Jesus. This must be true. But that is not the goal. Jesus says it for us if only we would listen. ⁸ *My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.* It is right there.

As we celebrate another World Communion Sunday, I would remind us of how this day came to be. In 1938, on the edge of WW 2, Presbyterians in NYC invited others to have Communion with them, and to pray for the world. It looked as if great darkness was coming, and it was already there. Fascism on the rise in Spain, Italy, and Germany, and Japanese aggression in China and throughout the East. Today we don't have the War. But we have societies in collapse. India is almost more of a crisis than we can begin to imagine. But the crisis is all around. People are very afraid. We don't know how all this will be resolved. So, we will live as Christians often have: we will live with faith. We will continue to believe that God is good, that life is good, and that good is stronger than evil. We will continue to believe that God's Kingdom will one day come to a trembling, wounded world. And all shall be well. But we need to remember a crucial thing today. Jesus calls us to be his branches, and to create goodness in this world, in his name. When we do this, God is glorified. How can that be anything but the greatest thing of all? ⁸ *My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.*

We are the branches. Let's pray.

