

'THE HEALTHY VINEYARD'

Isaiah 5:1-6; John 15:1-8

January 21, 2018 - Rev. Jerry Duggins

We've been preaching through the sayings of Jesus in John that begin with "I am...." These sayings are unique to John and are his way of filling out the picture of Jesus that's important to the community of faith. We began by exploring the idea of Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life through the music of Christmas. On Epiphany Sunday I talked about Jesus as the light of the world and last week Janet shared some reflections on Jesus as the good shepherd. This morning I want us to think about Jesus as the vine.

This image presents the perfect opportunity to remind us all that this year we are focusing on the idea of renewal. As with many perennials, the grape vine has a regular life cycle: from dormancy in the winter, to awakening in spring, to growth through the summer, and ending with the harvest in fall before returning to dormancy. One might say that every spring the plant is renewed. Over the winter the vineyard has had its branches pruned nearly all the way back to the main vine. The health of the new plant depends on the branch beginning its growth near the source of its life, the vine. The metaphor is pretty clear. Our health and growth depends on our returning again and again to Jesus. So when we try to understand Jesus through a variety of images such as light or good shepherd or vine, we are laying the groundwork for renewal.

Vineyard imagery is fairly common in scripture. The reading from Isaiah tells the story of a vineyard that has lost its way, a metaphor for the people of Israel who have lost their connection to God. The story is a sad one. God has done all the right things to take care of this vineyard. The branches have been properly cut back. The vine itself has received the right amount of rest. The vineyard received the right amount of water and sun at the right times. This vineyard couldn't have had a better caretaker. And yet it produced wild, sour-tasting grapes.

I'm picturing some kind of "attachment disorder." For no discernible reason, Israel has failed to bond well with God. The commandments intended to produce healthy community failed to take hold. The bond between God and people has lost value. The attachment that the covenant was intended to generate is missing.

Attachment disorders are characterized by an inability to bond with others, even significant others. I don't know enough about them to go into much detail, but I do think it's a fairly common spiritual problem in our faith journeys. We simply lose for periods of time the sense of connection to God.

We start out close to the vine, to Jesus. We begin to grow, to put forth fruit. We return to the vine, letting go of those things that brought no profit or simply finished their course. We grow again and bear more fruit. And then a time comes when we don't let go, don't return to the vine, and we get a little further away and maybe the fruit isn't quite so

good, and we keep getting further from the vine until we begin to think that we are our own beautiful plant, that we don't need or even know the vine anymore.

"I am the vine and you are the branches." The source of life and health for us is Jesus. Renewal depends on regularly returning to him. But this image is not just about Jesus. It's about the vineyard. We learn about the centrality of Jesus for the life of faith and we see this as well in the image of light and of the good shepherd. But here we see something about the importance of the follower. It is not the vine that bears fruit, but the branches. You are the branches.

Jesus says, "I am the vine," in his last instructions to his disciples before his arrest and death. These words are not just about himself, but about the community of faith that looks to him. He gives his life but we bear his fruit. But... we only do this as we continually recall our attachment to him. The healthy vineyard always comes back to the vine and in its season bears good fruit. We are not just about honoring Jesus but also about bearing Jesus into our lives. "I am the vine," he says, "And you are the branches."

Central to the faith journey are the relationships, the attachments that we form along the way. The core relationship to which we return repeatedly is with God through Jesus Christ. In this relationship we are nurtured by an unfailing love, a love that pushes us out into the world to form other relationships defined by love. We are the branches and together we make up the healthy vineyard.

There was a vineyard behind the last church we served. One of the pleasures that came every fall was to walk into the back yard and take a deep breath through the nose. The aroma from the vineyard was strong and sweet and a delight to the body and to the soul. So it is with the healthy vineyard of which we are invited to be a part. Thanks be to God. Amen.