

Once again, in today's gospel reading, Jesus offers us a metaphor. Do you remember last week's metaphor? Jesus said, "I am the... Good... Shepherd." What's this week's metaphor? Jesus says, "I am the... Vine." Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus identifies himself using a variety of metaphors. If you participated in our Lenten Bible study this year, you might remember these. "I am the Bread of Life. I am the Light of the World. I am the Door [or, in some translations, "I am the Gate"]. I am the Good Shepherd. I am the Resurrection. I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. I am the Vine." See ch. 6; 9; 10; 10; 11; 14; 15, respectively.) These seven metaphors from the Gospel of John are sometimes called the "I am" sayings of Jesus. In each instance, Jesus describes himself by using one particular metaphor, focusing on a different aspect of his identity and his relationship with us.

So back to today's metaphor. What is it, and what does it tell us about Jesus? Jesus says, "I am the... Vine." Jesus is the Vine, and his Father is the vinegrower. What is a vinegrower? Someone who grows grapes, most likely for wine-making. What does the vinegrower expect from the vineyard? Grapes. Because the Father's number-one priority is to produce grapes, he tends the vine, he aerates and waters the soil, he prunes the branches, and he picks the fruit at exactly the right time.

Who is this vinegrower whom Jesus calls "Father"? God, of course. If God is the vinegrower and Jesus is the vine, who are the branches? You and I. You and I are connected to Jesus, the Vine. Through him we receive sustenance and life, just as a branch receives moisture and nourishment from its vine. Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches.

Jesus chose this image, this agricultural metaphor, because everyone who heard him could relate to it. He lived in an agrarian economy, so many of his neighbors were farmers, and almost every family grew some fruit or vegetables in a family garden. Our economy is quite different than theirs, and few of us are farmers, but we can still grasp this metaphor by looking around us. Maybe you've been out for a walk recently, or maybe you've been doing work in your yard, and you've seen a vine or a bush that is budding or leafing—or maybe you've noticed some dead branches on a tree—or fallen on the ground.

Jesus knew what happens to a branch when it's connected to a vine, and he knew what happens when it becomes disconnected. He offered this metaphor to remind his followers to stay connected to him. If we cease to be connected to Jesus, we wither and die, just like a branch disconnected from a vine. If we stay connected, we grow and thrive and bear much fruit. Being connected to the vine allows a branch to receive moisture and nutrients, to grow, and to bear fruit, whether grapes, or tomatoes, or zucchini, or summer squash, or kiwi, or watermelon. Being connected to Jesus allows us to receive love from him and to thrive and grow. We then bear fruit, not grapes or zucchini or watermelon, but the fruit of love. Just as a branch bears fruit only when it is connected to its vine, you and I bear fruit for Jesus only when we are connected to him.

Jesus calls this connectedness "abiding." The Greek word for the verb "abide" is *meno* (spelled m-e-n-o); it's used 45 times in this gospel, so it's a significant word for the author. Translations for *meno*, in addition to "abide," include "dwell, remain, make yourself at home, and live." Do you abide with Jesus? Do you dwell with him? Do you remain in him? Do you make yourself at home with Jesus?

The English verb “abide” comes from the English word, “bide.” Do you know what it means? The only usage of “bide” I can recall being used in my lifetime is in the phrase, “I’ll bide my time,” that is, “I’ll wait;” to “bide” is “to wait, or to remain or stay somewhere.” The past tense of abide, “abode,” is also used as a noun meaning “a place of residence, or a house or home, or a habitual residence,” as when you invite someone to dine at your “humble abode.” The noun “abode” can also mean an “act of waiting.” The adjectival form, “abiding,” means “enduring or steadfast,” as in a lover’s impassioned confession of “abiding love.” “Abide” connotes a constancy of presence, a fidelity of dwelling together, a reliability of remaining loyal, a dependability of waiting. “Abide in me,” commands Jesus, inviting us to dwell with him, simply to be with him, to hang around him. Jesus noticed what happened when a branch was chopped off or cracked; as it was severed from its vine, it withered and died. He borrowed this image to teach his followers that, as long as they stayed connected to him, they would grow and thrive and bear fruit.

Let me tell you about someone who abided in Jesus. Her name was Joan, and she was married to Pr. Al Ahlstrom, who preached for us at King of Kings in my early years here. Joan abided in Jesus. She dwelt in him. She hung around him. From the time of her baptism at Messiah Lutheran Church in the Bronx through her marriage to Al, through her partnership in his calls at Messiah, Columbia University, Redeemer in Kingston and Christ in Ellenville, she abided in Jesus as a faithful disciple.

And she bore fruit. Joan Ahlstrom bore fruit not as a pastor or a university chaplain but as a disciple of Jesus, in her role as wife and mother and grandmother, as a faithful member of the congregations where Al served, and as an ambassador for Jesus. She didn’t get paid for it, and she did it not from a pulpit or a classroom, but right in her own living room. She bore fruit as she hosted gatherings for neighborhood children, for Columbia students, and for congregation members. Connected to Jesus, she received love from God and then shared it, through her smiles and her laughter, often with cookies and hot chocolate. She was a branch bearing fruit for Jesus, the Vine.

How do you bear fruit for Jesus? How do you share God’s love in your life, in your home, in your workplace, in your neighborhood, in this congregation? Jesus tells his disciples that, in order to bear fruit, we must abide in him, as Joan did. We must dwell with him; we must remain with him; we must make ourselves at home in him and live in him. Only as we are connected to Jesus do we receive God’s love and share it with others. We don’t manufacture the fruit of love by ourselves; instead, we receive God’s love, and we grow and thrive and then bear fruit as we are connected to the Vine, to Jesus.

All metaphors break down at some point. This vine metaphor breaks down when a branch is separated from its vine. What happens then? It withers and dies, and it can’t be put back onto the vine. But not so with Jesus. If you become separated from Jesus, the Vine, he will seek you out and graft you back onto himself so that you can abide in him again. He’s ready to reconnect you as often as you are in danger of becoming disconnected. How? Through Baptism, Eucharist, worship, prayer and Bible study. Through meditation or a walk in the woods, when you are fishing or knitting or sitting in your favorite chair with a cup of tea.

Whenever you get reconnected, whenever you abide in him, Jesus, the Vine, nurtures and nourishes you. Why? So that you bear fruit. So that, receiving love from Jesus and growing and thriving, you share it with others. Abiding in Jesus, you share God’s love with a compassionate ear or a silly card. With an offer to mow a lawn or bring a meal when a neighbor is ill. With tears or laughter. With jokes or a song. Maybe with a plate of cookies or a cup of hot chocolate. AMEN