

This Sunday Jesus tells us “he is the vine, and we are the branches; and if we remain in him, we will bear much fruit.” OK, I get it. I get the analogy Jesus is trying to make. But as someone who spent three years in the wine business before going to seminary, I find myself a little perplexed at Jesus’ use of vine and branch imagery. It is because anyone who is involved in growing grapes will tell you that if you want your vine to produce much fruit, then you will inevitably have to sacrifice quality to obtain a large yield. They will tell you that smaller yields (i.e. less fruit on the vine) give you higher quality grapes. So with that in mind, we might want to revisit Jesus the vine and ask him, “just what kind fruit are you after; high-yield or high quality?” From our gospel reading it sounds like Jesus is interested in quantity; he speaks over and over again about producing much fruit. But let’s consider such a vine.

One of the most productive vines in the world is the Muscadine vine, native to America especially in the South. According to the Schoomacher Encyclopedia of Wine, “wine from the muscadine vine has been made in the Carolinas, Florida and the gulf states for several centuries. And at one time a single vine on Roanoke Island covered two acres and yielded 2,000 gallons of wine a year.” There was no mention of whether the wine was drinkable or not. Now image such a vine, spanning two acres with all its branches, tangled, growing, expanding, moving further and further *away* from the vine. In short, a big mess. It produces a lot of fruit, but how are the branches in relation to the vine? They’re all over the place, doing their own thing, with little or no contact with the vine itself. Is that what Jesus had in mind you think?

When I think of that kind of vine, I can't help but think of the society and culture we live in. That particular vine is constantly growing, expanding, doing its own thing, producing branches and grapes for the sake of production, with less and less connection to the true vine that sustains the branches' life. I think that's a fair assessment of us, as a culture; we're constantly moving and producing, seeking our own gain, unbridled in our quest to achieve what we perceive as abundance and happiness.

If Jesus were to re-teach this parable of the vine and branches, I think he might say that the happiness we seek is found in producing fruit **close** to the vine. Close to the vine, the branches are stronger, they are more well-nourished, and are not easily swayed by every fashionable breeze that passes by. Closer to the vine, the branches know that the vine that sustains them is the vine that loves them. Closer to the vine, the branches produce an abundance of quality and rich fruit; not a load of sour grapes.

The gospel Jesus preaches to us today is how good it is to be a branch close to the vine. We are all connected to the vine; but how far from it are we, is the question. Perhaps we're comfortable way out there, an acre away, doing our own thing. Perhaps we've grown accustomed to the sourness and bitterness of the fruit we produce far-removed from the vine. But if it's true happiness, fulfillment, and purposefulness we want in our lives, then (as Jesus says) we have to begin pruning our branches, pruning ourselves, our lives, back towards the vine.

So what do we prune? I think we are called to prune our lifestyles, our attitudes, our selfishness, our self-centeredness, indeed anything that leads us *away* from true love of God and neighbor. For the supreme happiness, which we all seek, is paradoxically found only when we move beyond our selfish preoccupation with our own feelings and pleasures, and live sacrificially for others. That's what the vine does.

So, what are we, our Lord's branches, going to do? Will we grow further and further away along our own path of our own whims and pleasures? Or will we choose to prune ourselves back, choosing to bow down to the will of the vine grower and sacrifice whatever is needed to remain close to him, the vine, who gives and sustains our lives both now and forever more. The choice is ours.