

**Sermon for 4 Easter, 2021 (May 2) – Church of the Holy Trinity, Middletown CT  
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*Heavenly Father, grant that we may so abide in Jesus, the true vine, that we may live in Him and He in us, and that we may be transformed into His image and likeness. Amen.*

Today's third reading is the last of the seven great "I AM" passages in John's Gospel:

- I am the bread of life
- I am the light of the world
- I am the door
- I am the good shepherd
- I am the resurrection and the life
- I am the way, the truth, and the life
- And today's "I am the true vine"

In each of these, Jesus presents a powerful metaphor for who He is, and what that means for us.

Today's Gospel, the True Vine, has played a role in my spiritual life for a very long time, in fact for most of my Christian life.

About 40 years ago, this was the passage we were to study on the very first retreat I went on in college.

Back then, thinking about it for the first time as a college junior, I think four things stood out.

First, of course, this striking idea that, connected to Jesus, we bear much fruit; but on our own, without connection to Him, we are like dead twigs on the ground – indeed, without Him, we can do nothing.

Quite the message when you're the kind of teenager who thinks "I don't *want* help, I wanna do it on my own!"

Second, this curious idea of what it is to “abide in Him” and have him “abide in us”.

To abide is to stay, to wait patiently. It can also mean to dwell, the place where you stay – your house is your abode, the place you abide.

Third, what does it mean when it says God will prune us if we do not bear fruit?

I think that, at the time, it might have sounded to me like a kind of punishment; but if you’re a gardener, you know that that’s not what pruning is about.

Just recently, Ashley explained to me that some plants, like apple trees, only bear fruit on new growth, so – at the right time of year – you have to cut off some of the old growth so that new growth can form and bear fruit the next year.

And fourth, the amazing claim, “If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will and it will be done for you.”

An incredible promise – but I had all the usual questions about what it means, then, when I pray and God doesn’t do what I asked for.

It was only much later, when I began to garden, that I began to reflect on some of the deeper meaning of the metaphor.

Jesus liked to use botanical metaphors – last week, for example, we were compared to seeds, which need to fall to the ground and die to themselves in order to have a new and greater life.

And there are others – the sower, the weeds and the wheat, the mustard seed.

But this one strikes me as especially deep.

This time of year, when those who have yards do their spring cleanup, we find many branches that have fallen over the winter.

Most of them are indeed quite conspicuously dead, fit only to be thrown out.

Or a sudden windstorm, like the one we had this week, knocks a branch off a tree or a bush – the leaves are still green, there is still some sap in it, but you know that within a week it too will be withered and dead.

Even when we cut flowers and put them in a vase, they may look beautiful for a few days, their buds may even open up, but they are cut off from their source of life.

The Gospel suggests that this is what we are like when we are cut off from God in Christ: our mortal bodies may go on functioning for years or decades, but inwardly, we are spiritually dead, because we are cut off from the source of spiritual life.

Sometimes, when I am pruning a plant, I make a mistake and cut off a branch I hadn't intended to.

“Oh no!” I think. “If only I could put it back on so that it could remain alive!”

Fortunately, God *can* do this with us – if we are separated from Him, we can be re-integrated into the true vine, Jesus.

Indeed, in a sense, this passage suggests that this is just what Jesus came to do: to gather the fallen branches and give them new life in Himself.

There *is* a horticultural process that is similar to this: it is called grafting.

Vinegrowers have known about it for thousands of years, and the people in Jesus' day would have been familiar with it.

You take a sprig of one grapevine – say one that produces a particular type of grape – and make a little cut in a strong healthy plant, and bind them together.

Over time, the wound heals, and they become one plant.

The sap of the vine nourishes the grafted sprig, making it strong and allowing it to bear fruit.

And as it grows from season to season, you need to cut off some of the old growth, which no longer produces fruit, so that new fruit can grow.

St. Paul uses the language of grafting in Romans 11, saying we are like shoots of a wild olive tree that have been grafted onto a cultivated olive tree – the kind that bears good fruit.

So what is the new life in Christ like, and where is it headed – what does the metaphor of the vine say about who we are and what we are becoming?

Two weeks ago, in the third chapter of John's first letter, we had the image of being adopted into God's family, with Jesus walking beside us as our older brother.

In today's image of the vine, the relationship is even deeper:

Again, we enter into something larger – not a family, but a great divine Vine with many branches.

The Vine does not simply walk alongside us, we become part of it, and share its life.

The life-sap of Jesus' divine life enters into us – something we could never have on our own – and in fact we become, as it were, a part of Him.

Paul says something similar when he speaks of us as being the members of Christ's body – the hands, feet, eyes (a human body rather than vine).

If you look at a branch that has been cut off a plant or blown down by the wind, it is in a sense an individual thing: you can tell very clearly where it begins and ends, just as the boundaries of our physical bodies are clear.

But if you look carefully at a living plant, yes, you can distinguish individual branches, twigs, and shoots as well as the trunk, but it's harder to say precisely where the branch begins and the trunk ends.

It's not like a Tinker Toy or a Lego set where there are completely distinct pieces that simply get stuck together.

The trunk puckers out and then tapers, perhaps bending upwards or to the side in the process.

And of course the trunk and all of the branches make up a single plant, a single living organic being.

And if we are each part of the body of Christ, branches of the True Vine, something like that is true of us as well: we don't lose our individuality, yet we're no longer disconnected individuals, like a branch on the ground, or a severed hand, we are also organic parts of something larger: Christ and his Church.

And sometimes the dividing lines between us and Christ become blurred.

I think this is what Paul has in mind when he says "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."

Some of the great mystics report experiences in which they so strongly feel Christ in them and themselves in Christ that it is not so much like two beings walking side by side, but a union.

Perhaps this is part of what our Lord meant when he spoke in these reciprocal terms: you abide in me, and I abide in you.

And what St. John meant when he said that the love that comes to dwell within us – the love we can feel for others and show to others – is none other than God's own love, flowing through us and radiating outward to the world.

Now, the message common to my two sermons this past month is that Bible tells us that Jesus did not *just* come to take away our sins, but to give us new life in Him, and that we are being made like Him, transformed into His nature.

Today's Gospel gives us an image for what this is like: it is like the way a vine gives its own life to its branches, even branches that have been grafted on.

And a few years ago, I learned something about grafting that revealed something even deeper and more wonderful about this metaphor.

So here's a little bit of science.

When a cutting is grafted onto a root vine, it isn't just that the vine's life-giving sap flows into it.

It isn't just that they become one plant, there's still something more.

The transplanted branch also begins to change biologically – at the level of its very DNA – so that it is gradually transformed to take on some of the characteristics of the vine.

This suggests a wonderful metaphor for how *we* are transformed into the nature of Christ: it is as though our own nature – our spiritual DNA, if you will – is gradually being changed, to take on the nature of the True Vine, which is Christ.

When we are grafted onto Christ, His nature begins to become *our* nature as well – as though we're being hybridized – still individual human beings, yes, but human beings who share something of Christ's nature, being transformed into his image and likeness.

This isn't something we *do*.

It is something that *happens*, like an organic process, when we are grafted onto Christ.

It happens gradually and invisibly, and most of the time we aren't even aware that it's taking place.

But perhaps, looking back over months or years, we see that God has been at work in us, changing how we think and act, changing our character, our temperament, our very nature.

The person who used to insist on her own way becomes one who willingly chooses God's way.

Our impatience is transformed into God's patience, our anxiety into God's peace, our anger into God's forgiveness, our fear into Divine hope, our callous indifference into God's love.

Organic change, change from within, does not happen all at once, and so we must both be patient with ourselves and others and rejoice that it is happening, even when it is not seen.

It won't be complete until we see Christ face to face – then “we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.”

But that day will come for each of us, and even now, God has so loved us as to graft us into Christ, and is working day by day to transform us into His likeness.