

Easter 5, May 2, 2021, John 15:1-8

This week Jesus tells us, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower.” Last week we heard Jesus say, “I am the good shepherd.” And if we read chapters 6 thru 15 in John’s Gospel, we will hear Jesus say he is The Bread of Life, The Light of the World, The Gate for the Sheep, and a number of other self-descriptive metaphors.

Jesus is doing his best to use familiar images, especially for the people of his day, to describe the relationship between him, us, and God the Father, and to help us understand how essential that relationship is to what he calls “abundant life.”

Last week I said that Jesus, The Good Shepherd, stood in contrast to the former kings of Israel; those not good shepherds who misused their authority and abused the flock for which they were supposed to care. No doubt Jesus’ listeners would hear his description of himself as the true, or faithful, vine as a contrast to the unfaithful vine, Israel, as it is described in the Old Testament. Planted by God, the unfaithful vine yielded wild grapes instead of the sweet fruit God intended.

Now Jesus, the True Vine, would remain faithful to God no matter what. Jesus would produce fruit pleasing to God, fruit that would sprout from his branches, his followers; you and me.

Since we are the branches upon which the fruit of Jesus will be borne, it is important for us to understand just what this fruit is. And, like any other analogy or metaphor, it can only be understood in context.

The word for fruit, or some form of it, is used in the NT over 50 times with a wide variety of meanings. It can mean repentance, offerings of money, or new believers among other things. In the context of today’s reading, fruit most likely means “love”, especially our love for one another.

This passage is part of the “Upper Room Discourse” which began at Chapter 13 with Jesus washing the disciples’ feet. At that point Jesus turns his attention from public ministry to private instruction of his followers. He puts aside the signs and wonders that revealed him to outsiders and focuses on teaching those closest to him.

The emphasis of his teaching is now on how they are to carry on his mission and ministry once he is gone. One of the most familiar statements in this discourse is what we know as the New Commandment, “Love one another as I have loved you, by this people will know that you are my disciples, that you have love for one

another.” In today’s passage he reiterates that commandment saying, “My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit (love one another) and become my disciples.

The real thrust of Jesus’ message, though, is not fruitbearing but abiding. While it is good to be a fruity Christian, none of us could bear fruit without the abiding presence of our relationship with God through our faith in Jesus Christ.

Eight times in these 8 verses Jesus uses the word “abide”, an English translation of the Greek, “meno.” Meno is one of those complex Greek words that is hard to pin down in the English language. It can mean, “remain/stay”, “live/dwell”. or “endure/continue”.

It might best be understood as “to be connected” not just connected TO but connected IN. “Live in, remain in, continue in me as I live, remain and continue in you.”

The relationship Jesus describes between himself and us is mutual, intimate, and indwelling. He brackets his description of this relationship with a description of how our relationship with God the vinegrower is sustained through our connection to Jesus, the vine.

God, the divine Vinegrower, planted his own Son in our midst as a baby in a manger. As the Incarnate Vine grew, he branched out by calling disciples to follow him. Those branches are to share his mission of bearing the fruit of God’s love to the world. Unfortunately, some of those branches did not bear good fruit, they became infested with the blight of sin instead.

God, the Vinegrower, cares for the branches that do bear fruit by pruning, a Greek word also translated as “cleansing.” He takes away hindrances to our fruitbearing, things like shame, guilt, fear, and sin. Pruning is a good thing, it means the Vinegrower cares about us, he wants to guide and shape our growth and nourish our fruitbearing. In fact, one of God’s threats against unfaithful Israel was that he would no longer prune or hoe his vineyard.

God’s love, planted in Jesus Christ, nourishes us through our intimate, indwelling relationship with him so that, in our fruitbearing, we can share that love with all the world.

By this the Father is glorified, that we have love for one another. Amen.