

Jim Gill

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"The True Vine"

Psalm 22:25-31 John 15:1-8 I John 4:7-21

INTRODUCTION TO JOHN 15:1-8

Last week we looked at one of Jesus' "I Am" sayings from the gospel of John. We heard Jesus' claim "I Am the Good Shepherd." This morning I want to take a look at one of the most intimate personal declarations of Jesus, "I am the true Vine. Hear the word of the Lord from the gospel of John 15:1-8.

Let's pray. Thank you for this your word to us. Give us ears to hear and minds to comprehend, so that our lives may respond so that we may produce much fruit.

A newspaper reporter went to interview a successful entrepreneur. "How did you do it?" he asked. "How did you make all this money?"

"I'm glad you asked," the entrepreneur replied. "Actually, it's a rather wonderful story. You see, when my wife and I married, we started out with a roof over our heads, some food in our pantry, and five cents between us. I took that nickel, went down to the grocery store, bought an apple, and shined it up. Then I sold it for ten cents."

"What did you do then?" the reporter asked.

"Well," he said, "then I bought two more apples, shined them up, and sold them for twenty cents." The reporter thought this would be a great human interest story.

"Then what?" the reporter asked excitedly. "Then my father-in-law died and left us \$20 million dollars."

That man prospered not because of his own ingenuity. He prospered because he was connected.

Jesus wants his followers to get connected to him and stay that way. Our success will not be based on our own ingenuity, our cleverness, our strength and stamina. Our success, the fruit that we will bear will depend on our being connected to him, the true vine.

When Jesus spoke about vineyards certainly the people could identify with that metaphor, even as a person in Iowa would know about corn, or in Mississippi about cotton. It didn't make any difference whether or not they were in that business. They had grown up around it enough that you would still be familiar with it.

But there was something else that these listeners would most certainly know. A vineyard was the symbol of their nation. In America we might think of amber waves of grain, but in Judea they thought of their nation as a vineyard. It was a kind of national identity. Over and over again in the Old Testament, Israel is pictured as the vine or the vineyard of God.

Isaiah the prophet pictured Israel as the vineyard of God. He said: The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel. In Jeremiah, we read God referring to his chosen people in this way: "I planted you as a choice vine". Hosea spoke a word of judgment when he said: "Israel has become an empty vine." Josephus, the Roman historian, informs us that over the Temple in Jerusalem was carved an exquisite, gold leaf grapevine. It stood as a symbol of national unity. In the eyes of its people, Israel itself was the true vine, whose roots ran all the way back to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

In Jesus analogy, he likened himself to a vine, while the fruit bearing branches are his followers. God the Father is depicted as the vinedresser, the one who cultivates the vineyard. The vinedresser waters and tends the soil, so that the vine is properly nourished. He takes pride in his crop. But this means that he also prunes the vines and removes the dead wood. What Jesus is saying is clear. The disciples should receive their strength from Jesus. He is the true vine. If they break away from him, they will be like unproductive branches and die and bear no fruit.

This week I've been thinking back over the last 40 years since my ordination. Like I wrote in my Faith Lift article last Wednesday my first call was to serve as a Campus minister at Lamar University. It was called the UCF, the United Christian Fellowship. I was sponsored by Presbyterians, Disciples of Christ, United Church of Christ and my office was in the Methodist Center a block away from the Baptist Student Union. I wasn't content to stay in the office waiting for the students to come to me. I had a wooden sign made that I would hang on the branch of a tree by the student center and take my cassette tape player connected to my battery powered guitar amplifier and set up shop. The sign said UCF Branch Office.

Jesus is the True Vine.we are the branches, his Branch Offices. For me, this week has been a week of the branch offices demonstrating our connectedness.

On Monday night our Session met. Every fourth Monday we gather, bringing the results of what our various committees have been doing. We open with a devotional and prayer. Not only did you surprise me last Sunday with the Power point slide celebrating my 40th year of my ordination the Session surprised me with my favorite: a red velvet cake with candles. In our meeting we shared our thoughts, made motions, seconded and discussed them--presenting all 3 sides of every issue, and passed them. In the end we closed in prayer, demonstrating that we are the branch office of the True Vine.

On Tuesday I went to the office of the Presbytery to meet as a member of the General Council. There are 12 of us. Some are pastors. Some are elders. We are from at least 10 different churches seeking to do God's will for the churches in our presbytery. We opened with a devotional and prayer. We shared our thoughts and made motions, seconded and discussed them presenting all 3 sides of every issue and passed them. In the end we closed in prayer, demonstrating that we are another branch office of the True Vine.

On Wednesday I went to the Rotary lunch here in our Fellowship Hall. We opened with the Pledge of Allegiance to our flag, had a prayer and sang a song. This week we heard about a medical clinic in Mexico that we support. At the end of the meeting they donated \$4,500 dollars from our funds to that clinic. After that announcement a member came forward and added to it another \$2,000 of his own funds, demonstrating that they are another branch office of the True Vine.

That night I went to Choir practice. We opened with prayer and dedicated the next hour to learning music to share with you on Sunday mornings. Our director and accompanist lead us as we seek to each contribute our part, demonstrating that we are another branch office of the True Vine.

Thursday night I went to the Starlight Gala at the Spring Hill Suites for the United Way. We opened with prayer. We enjoyed a meal and heard about the way to Live United. We presented awards to those who have volunteered their time to serve others in our community. We heard testimony from the family who was with us last Sunday who were recipients of the blessings from the Mennonite Disaster Services who helped restore their home from the devastation of Hurricane Harvey. The program was presented on a stage that they borrowed from us, saving them a \$500 fee from the hotel. That night even the Hilton Spring Hill Suites was another branch office of the True Vine.

I have to confess that I was so busy helping the United Way save \$500 by loading our risers to become their stage that I totally forgot about the Lion's Club fish fry on Thursday. In one way it was a good thing though because if I had I might have gained 6 pounds this week instead of the 5 I did gain. But again, this week the Lions Club demonstrated that they are another branch office of the True Vine.

On Friday I went to the dedication of the latest home built by Habitat for Humanity. We opened with prayer. The lady who prayed was the grandmother of the single mother of three who was receiving the house. People from all walks of life in our community were there. It made me glad that we dedicate these homes before any furniture is in place because it was Standing Room Only. Of particular interest were the cabinets that were built through a program that Lee College has with the prison in Huntsville. Men who are disconnected from their families because of their incarceration were able to build cabinets for a family

they will never meet. It made me proud that we at Faith house the offices of Habitat for Humanity in our building--yet another branch office of the True Vine.

On Friday night I went to Luna's with the Lunatics, the nickname that I've given to that group of folks that make a habit of gathering there every Friday night at 5pm. There is something special about gathering around a table, even if it is at a restaurant. On Friday nights Luna's is another branch office of the True Vine.

On Saturday morning we gathered in our Fellowship Hall for our Men's Breakfast. We opened with prayer led by a new friend of mine, the Rev. Calvin Dixon. I sat with him and his wife at the United Way Dinner on Thursday night. I first met him however, when he came to the Bay Area Ministerial Alliance breakfast that we hosted in our Fellowship Hall this month. Calvin is a retired Air Force Chaplain whose wife is from Baytown. She spent 26 years traveling around with him through the Air Force so now they have come to her hometown for a change to start a church here. For the last 4 months they've been meeting in the Baytown Civic Center, another branch office of the True Vine.

At our Men's Breakfast we were treated to presentation by Dan Helgesen who is the manager of the Exxon Refinery here in Baytown. He was born in Seoul, South Korea but was abandoned at birth, left on a doorstep and taken to an orphanage.

However, he was adopted by a Lutheran Pastor and his wife from Kansas. When the time came for him to graduate and go on to college he wanted to go to KU, but when he was filling out the forms for application the instructor said, "Don't use initials like M.I.T. Spell the words out like Massachusetts Institute of Technology. So he did and that's where he was accepted.

I developed a whole new appreciation for what ExxonMobil is and what it does for our world from this part of the world. He also shared what ExxonMobil did to help victims of Hurricane Harvey. From a doorstep in Korea to the Manager one of the largest refineries in the world was an amazing testimony. He brought a dozen Bibles to share with us and at the end of the meeting they were all gone. He gives away Bibles wherever he speaks, demonstrating that even the office of the manager of the Baytown ExxonMobil Refinery can be a branch office of the True Vine.

On Saturday night some of us went to El Toro for Friends of Faith. We opened with prayer and enjoyed a delicious dinner being entertained by Justa Rose Garrett. While we were waiting for our food I saw a group of folks come in. One of them wore a white T-shirt that had the words, Live United. That is this year's theme for the United Way. His T-shirt was a reminder of what I witnessed on Thursday night at the United Way banquet. It was another reminder that even El Toro can be a branch office of the True Vine.

After dinner we went to Lee College for the Baytown Symphony's concert of the music from the Harry Potter film series. From the piccolo to the Dumbledoredressed double bass player they each played their part. There were 5 dancers that moved in precision to the music, and Lee College students acting out scenes in front of the Symphony. It made me proud to see Allison Frey our Sunday morning flute player playing timpani drums and Nedra Bradley playing piano. It made me proud to see David Benard at a table handing out brochures and Will Call tickets. It made me proud that we are now providing office space for the Symphony, another branch office of the True Vine.

In a few moments we are going to hear from one of our members Debbye Waller about her involvement with C.A.S.A. which stands for Court Appointed Special Advocates. She will share how she and that organization work with neglected and abused children and support them when they have to go to court demonstrating the even a Court of Justice can be another branch office of the True Vine.

Here it is the great secret of life. It is to be connected... connected to the One True Vine who is the ultimate Source of power, to the One who will never forsake us, to the One who will help us live productive, meaningful lives.

We all have a need to be connected to Jesus who is the source of our spiritual power, but we also need to be connected to others. We need to know that there are people who care about us. We need to know that we are not alone. To be connected also means we have God's presence in our lives. We are not alone. Someone shares our life. Someone is there for us.

For some reason a man had stopped attending the services of his church. Noting this fact, the pastor called upon him one winter evening to discuss the matter. As the two men talked, they sat in front of the wood-burning fireplace where a fire burned briskly on the hearth. During the conversation the minister casually took the tongs from their place beside the mantle, and without comment, reached into the flames, removed a brightly glowing ember, and laid it in a place by itself at the edge of the hearth. For a while both men sat in silence watching the small mass as it gradually lost its glow, darkened, became gray and then black. The man then turned to his pastor, sighed, and said, "I see what you mean, Pastor; I'll be back next Sunday."

Our faith is maintained in fellowship. Apart from the fire, the ember cools and dies. So does faith - apart from the fellowship which nurtures and sustains it. Apart from the vine the branches wither and die.

We may not be connected to a wife who inherits \$20,000,000. We can however be connected to a Savior through whom we inherit life eternal because we are a part of his branch office of the True Vine.

We have gathered here this morning. We have opened with prayer. As we prepare to join in prayer I wonder if I might dare to ask you as a way of demonstrating our connectedness would you mind standing and joining hands with at least one other person as we come before the Lord in prayer? May this be a way of demonstrating that EVEN in Worship we are a branch office of the True Vine?

Let us pray, Lord, you are the source of life that flows to and through us. In this sanctuary from the world we feel a sense of connection to you and to one another. Thank you that you call us to be a part of a fellowship, that we can draw strength not only from you, but from one another. As we join our hands may we do so fully cognizant of what it cost you to be connected to us. You are the Bread of Life Broken for us. You are the Vine from which the wine comes that of which we partake, symbolizing your blood which was shed for us. Because we are not only connected to you but to each other we lift to you the prayer concerns of those you have gathered in this room at this time

1 Illustrations For Biblical Preaching, by Michael P. Green

2 Connected to Christ, by Joel Leyrer