

**Sermon for Sunday, August 30, 2009**  
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**FRIENDS OF GOD**  
**John 15:1-17**

My parents didn't move at the beginning or the end of their marriage, but they had one stretch of ten years when they moved seven times, so I went to seven schools from grade one through twelve. So every year or two I had to figure out how to be accepted, how to find friends in a new school. I learned that it's about performance. Do well in school – but not too well! Make people laugh. Be good enough at sports that the other boys want you on their team. In short – perform and you will be accepted.

That is still the general rule of life. Perform at work, perform socially, be good enough to make the team – any team – and people will love you.

John 15 offers an alternative to "the way things are." Jesus says his disciples have life in him – the true vine. We are his beloved, we're his friends. Yes, Jesus demands things of us: we must love one another and abide in him. But his love and friendship come first. The gift of life comes first, as the first<sup>1</sup> metaphor shows.

**1. Jesus is the true vine**

This summer a vine sprouted spontaneously in my small garden. It came from our compost area, grew fast and produced dozens of blossoms. I decided to watch it, but let it go for a while. Alas, despite all the promises made by those blooms, the vine produced just one piece of fruit – a cantaloupe that grew to a fair size, then rotted abruptly before it ripened. I had a bad vine. I also had very good flowers, blooming prolifically.

An observation like that lies behind the first of the several images Jesus uses to describe the life of faith in John 15.

Jesus says, "I am the true vine." He says he is **true** because there were many false vines before him, vines that produced many blooms, but no fruit. They were disappointments, false vines. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea all developed this theme.

Isaiah says God planted a vineyard "on a fertile hillside." He did everything a good farmer can do. He cleared the field of stones and "planted the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit." God asked Israel, "What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad?" Therefore God says he will "break down its wall, and it will be trampled... neither pruned nor cultivated, and briars and thorns will grow there." Isaiah 5:1-6.

Isaiah explains: The vineyard "is the house of Israel... [God] looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress" (Isaiah 5:7). Israel, the Old Testament often says, had every reason to be a good, fruitful vineyard. God gave them a land, a system of rule, and good laws. He promised to be their God. He made covenants of promise and grace. But they rejected them and bore no fruit.

Many passages make this point. Psalm 80 is one of them, but it has a twist: It admits Israel's

failure, but pleads for God's mercy. "Restore us, O God; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved" (Psalm 80:3). The Psalm confesses guilt: "O God Almighty... You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it, it took root and filled the land" (Psalm 80:7-9). But God's vine is ravaged: Lord "Look down from heaven and see! Your vine is cut down, burned with fire; at your rebuke your people perish." (Psalm 80:14-16).

Then he prays: "Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand, the son of man you have raised up for yourself..." (Psalm 80:17). This is a clear prophecy of Jesus, who is the Son of Man. He sits on the Father's right hand. It is a plea that the Lord stop dealing with Israel as a whole. It is a fruitless and trampled vine. Instead, the Lord must work through the One True Israelite, the One who is faithful and true.

The Psalm writer pleads, "Revive us, and we will call on your name. Make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved" (Psalm 80:19).

In the prophet Micah, the Lord laments faithless, fruitless Israel. "What misery is mine! I am like one who gathers summer fruit at the gleaning of the vineyard; there is no cluster of grapes to eat, none of the early figs that I crave. The godly have been swept from the land; not one upright man remains" (Micah 7:1-2). But wait, God will rebuild his nation. "I will show them my wonders" (Micah 7:11-15).

When Jesus says, "I am the true vine," he says he is the One True Israelite. Through Jesus, God will work wonders again. He will re-establish his people. He answers the cry of the prophets and the psalms. He is the true, the faithful vine. He who fulfills God's call to Israel to bear the fruit God seeks.

"I am the true vine" is the last "I am" statement in John. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world. I am the gate. I am the good shepherd. I am the resurrection and the life. I am the way and the truth and the life." And finally, "I am the true vine."

In past weeks, we stressed that these statements teach us to take our deepest longings to the Lord. He meets our most basic needs – for light, food, and direction. Now Jesus is saying something more:

- Of all the lights, Jesus says, "I am the true light" (1:9).
- Of all foods, Jesus says, "I am the true bread" (6:32).
- Of all vines – of all sources of life, Jesus is "the true vine" (John 15:1).
- There is a temple in Jerusalem, but Jesus is the true temple (Hebrews 8:2).

There is more. At several points, Jesus says he replaces what the Lord gave Israel. God gave Israel a temple, but Jesus says his body is the true temple. In his body, a sacrifice covered sin (John 2)!

He replaces the holy days. In John 7-8, he shows that he replaced the Feast of Tabernacles, the greatest feast of that day. The feast of tabernacles celebrated the harvest and the gifts of water and light that allow the harvest to grow. Jesus says, "I am the light of the world. I am the living water."

John 15 continues the theme when Jesus says "I am the true vine." The vine is the root and source of life for all plants, the source of fruit. The images of John 15 describe the life in ever

more personal terms. The first is agricultural: We're united to the vine. We are branches that bear fruit as we remain in Christ. The next images are warmer: We are God's beloved and Jesus' friends.

Jesus says, "I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener" (literally "farmer") (15:1-2). Farmers and gardeners know that many plants need to be pruned. Wandering shoots must be trimmed to produce the best results. Prune a rose bush to get better flowers. Prune a tomato plant or a peach tree so the vitality goes to the fruit.

Jesus says the father cuts off fruitless branches. Fruitless branches seem to be Israelites who say, "Yes, I belong to Israel" but they rejected Jesus and lived however they pleased. Today, it's people who are baptized in church. Then they show up at confirmation, wedding and funeral. In intervening years, their "faith" has no bearing on anything they say, think or do. The Father removes these branches. They are no part of his life.

But he prunes - literally, cleanses (katharizo) – true branches that bear some fruit, so they will bear more. How does that happen?

Means of grace. Read the Bible. Think, meditate, pray, listen. Let the word cleanse you. I receive a morning devotional that prunes from Scotty Smith, a gospel-driven pastor. His devotionals cleanse me because they rebuke my sin. Example: His meditation on Proverbs 12:16: "A fool shows his annoyance at once, but a prudent man overlooks an insult." The proverb makes him consider annoyance and when he does, he needs to confess:

"I am easily annoyed. I'm annoyed by the guy that races me when lanes merge. I'm annoyed when the gas pump trickles too slowly. I'm annoyed by humidity when I want to run. I'm annoyed by low talkers and loud talkers. I'm annoyed when I have to repeat myself. I'm annoyed at whiners, so much that I start whining. I'm annoyed at ever having to wait in line for anything."

I'm just glad I'm not like that! Actually, I'm glad his devotionals only last one page. Several times a week, they prune me, cleanse me, teach me to repent.

In 15:3, Jesus offers vital comfort: "You are already clean because of the word that I have spoken to you." That is, when we listen and believe, when we hear the word and believe the claims of Jesus, believe in him, we are joined to the vine. If we remain in the vine, his life is ours. Clean first means justified by faith. Second, it means the progressive cleansing of the Spirit.

## **2. Jesus is the vine; We are fruitful branches as we abide in him (15:5-8)**

We call this the concept or doctrine of our union with Christ. Our faith in him leads to a union of our lives. People assume Debbie knows theology because she spends time with me. There is some truth in that. People assume I know names because Debbie is so good at remembering names. There is some truth in that – because she reminds me all the time. Each gets credit for the strengths of the other and it makes some sense. But catch me away from Debbie and I'm not so good with names.

So the Christian must remain in Christ and does remain in Christ (15:4). As we do, we bear fruit. Why? Life produces fruit. If I have an apple tree, it bears apples naturally. I don't walk out to the tree and give it pep talks or staple directions to the trunk: Stay in the sun, make sure your

roots find water, and give me some apples by late summer. Commands are pointless. Apple trees naturally, spontaneously, bear apples. All branches that aren't cut off do so.

In human life, teachers answer questions. Musicians play and sing. Doctors diagnose. Some watch people walk and can tell you what's wrong. And Christians bear fruit – kind words, acts of service. So be yourself. Bear fruit according to your call, nature.

I was talking to a member of the staff who was working too many hours, yet was concerned about tasks not completed and ministry without perfect oversight. This is the counsel: Do all you can and should do and when you are done, stop and leave it to the Lord who will accomplish what he needs to accomplish. Is this mystical or blind faith? I don't think so. The Lord will move someone. It will well up. It will be their nature and they will bear the fruit that comes from union with Christ, the true vine.

I've seen it twice recently: We've wanted to start a ministry or taken a short step toward it. No one can give themselves to it. Then a year later, someone says, "I would like to start..." Good. Go for it. Two requests: Let us help you if we can and keep us informed so we can spread the word. So we bear fruit.

Verse 15:7 says a second result of abiding in Christ is internal - better prayer: "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you." This does **not** mean we can ask and claim whatever we wish and get it. The promise is to those who "remain in me" Jesus says. If his words remain in us, prayers will be heard because we'll ask for the right things.

Prayers that violate God's commands will be denied. The Lord must refuse prayers such as: "Dear Lord, help me deceive this fool." James says, "When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures" (James 4:3).

Other prayers are morally good. For example, a prayer that a sick friend recover. But God doesn't grant requests that violate his purpose, his will: Paul sought relief from a "thorn" in his flesh (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). David asked God to spare the life of his infant son (2 Samuel 12:13-23). But no, Paul stayed sick and David's son died. Scripture can seem to say all genuine prayers are effective (Mark 11:24, James 5:15-16). John says, "If we ask anything according to his will, he hears us" (1 John 5:14). But we still say, "Your will be done." That is, Lord, fulfill your purposes, not mine.

### **3. Beloved of God. John (15:9-12)**

The idea that the Lord loves is familiar enough that today we may simply say it, then approach it from the opposite angle, such as how the Lord treats us when we are least lovable. See Psalm 73: "When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you. Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory... My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." Psalm 73:21ff).

Asaph says, "I was grieved, embittered, senseless." It's a confession we need. We live in a fallen world among foolish people.

- We live in a fallen world that often frustrates our wishes.
- We live in a competitive world. One succeeds, another fails and the loser is easily crushed or bitter.

- It's a forgetful world - people forget things that matter to us.
- We react with a fragile, weary, easily distressed heart. We expect a kind of perfection this world cannot give.

When incidents pile up we become like the psalmist, Asaph—envious, angry, petulant. We're anxious when we feel insecure. We are frustrated when deprived of something that matters to us. We act like children crying over toys we can't have. [Sometimes parents laugh at childish whining and tears, sometimes we get upset. Sometimes we are empathetic because we know we are prone to the same tumults – we simply mask it better. But the good parent always loves.]

Now, Jesus' love is better than a parent's. "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you" (15:9). That love is eternal, unchanging, knowing. The amazing thing about God's love is this: He loves us in this eternal, unchangeable way, although we do not begin to merit it. The love of Father, Son and Spirit is based on beauty, attraction and harmony. We are beautiful and attractive sporadically at best. All too often, we are ugly and far, far from harmony with God.

We say, "God's love grants unconditional acceptance" and that's true. But we can be much more precise. At the start, his love is *contra* conditions. He loved us when we were ugly and weak, committed sinners and rebels.

He also accepts us unconditionally after we come to faith, even when we remain ugly and rebellious. But – listen – while his love is unconditional, it is not lazy or unconcerned about conditions. His love is unconditional but concerned and strong, so that he creates new conditions in and for his children. So he loves us when we lose our way. But he also sets us back on the way:

He commands and requires that we remain in his love (15:9). We must "obey his commands... just as [Jesus] obeyed [the] Father's commands" (15:10). The chief command: "Love each other as I have loved you" (15:12). The law fills out what that means, but if you're on the spot and don't know what to do, ask: How does God love me?

Verse 15:11 says, "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." I thought of my daughter who flew to China this week for a semester abroad completing her Chinese major. Thirty-two hours alone, multiple flights, layovers. A number of people asked me, "Are you worried about her?" My reply: She isn't the kind of child you worry about. If a flight is cancelled, if she misses a contact, she'll figure it out. Her confidence gave her joy and it gave Debbie and me joy in her. God's joy in us is far greater when we come to godly maturity.

#### **4. We are God's friends (15:13-17)**

We are connected to the vine, the beloved of God. Now we're his friends: "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command" (15:13-14).

The Bible rarely calls God the "friend" of his people. We know intuitively that God loves us, but "friend" is more personal, more intimate. Friends choose and know each other personally. The Bible calls God a friend just five times. Those five show the central traits of

God as friend: self-disclosure and helpful presence. Consider God and his friend Abraham (2 Chronicles 20:7, James 2:23).

In Genesis 18, the angel of the Lord visited Abraham and Sarah when they were ninety-nine and eighty-nine years old. The angel announced that he would help them, giving them the child God had promised them twenty-five years earlier. Then he told Abraham what he was about to do. He disclosed his plan to judge Sodom and Gomorra (Genesis 18:17-19) He is just and cannot tolerate the wickedness of those cities. Abraham objected, as friends do: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?... Will not the judge of the earth do right (Genesis 18:23-25)?" The Lord assures Abraham that he is just and merciful. He would spare the whole city of Sodom for the sake of even ten righteous men (Genesis 18:32). In the end, he delivers every decent person and their family.

The Bible also calls Moses the friend of God in Exodus 33. As a friend, God helped Moses lead Israel out of Egypt. He also disclosed himself. Many Israelites prayed to the Lord in a special "tent of meeting." But when Moses went, the glory of God descended on it. The Lord, "used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend (Exodus 33:11). And he told Moses about himself. I am "The Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished (Exodus 34:6-7)."

The Lord is also a friend to Israel because they are children of Abraham: "I have chosen you... So do not fear, for I am with you... I am your God. I will strengthen you and... will uphold you with my righteous right hand" (Isaiah 41:8-10).

Like the Father, Jesus befriends the undeserving: "He is the friend of tax-collectors and sinners" (Matthew 11:19). He is also the friend of his disciples, showing the same two traits: self-disclosure and helpful presence.

John 15:13-15 says, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends [help]. You are my friends if you do what I command... I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you" [self-disclosure].

In 1953, an eight-man expedition was pinned down in a ferocious blizzard high on K2 waiting to make an assault on the summit when a team member developed thrombophlebitis, a life-threatening altitude-induced blood clot. They had to get him down immediately if they hoped to save him. Pete Schoening and others started lowering him down a steep ridge as the storm raged. At 25,000 feet, a climber slipped and pulled four others off with him. Reflexively wrapping the rope around his shoulders and ice ax, Schoening somehow managed to single-handedly hold on to the sick man and simultaneously arrest the slide of the five falling climbers without being pulled off the mountain himself. Without a moment's warning, this man managed to save the lives of six men.<sup>1</sup>

Pete instinctively risked his life for his friends and saved six lives in one act of strength, balance and courage. Yet it pales compared to the act of Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> *Into Thin Air*, pages 95-96.

- Pete Schoening risked his life; Jesus gave his life.
- Pete acted instinctively; Jesus knew exactly what he was doing.
- Pete saved five lives; Jesus saved billions.

Jesus says he gave his life for his friends. God's friendship with us is different from typical human friendships. No human friendship is as one-sided as Jesus' friendship with us. God knows us, so we need not disclose ourselves to him, but he chooses to reveal himself to us. Moreover, he helps us far more than we can help him. Ultimately we can give nothing to him.

Still, he is our friend. We are more than servants, because "everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you" (15:15). He reveals his thoughts and character to us, he helps us.

So our friendship with Jesus is one-sided and unconditional. Yet he does create new conditions. He does it by asking us to act like friends.

Remain with him, abide, continue, as friends do. Share his values. Friends do. So "You are my friends if you do what I command." As we remain in him we will "bear fruit – fruit that will last" (15:16). That fruit will bless the world around us, complete our joy and keep us close to him.