

“Who Do You Need in Your Life?”

John 15:1-8

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They grew behind the house and served as a border between the yard and the open field. In the fall, they were cut back and you could see right through them. In the summer, you could not even see daylight through them because they were so thick. I am referring to my grandmother's grapevines.

Every year they produced the finest grapes, which she used to make grape jelly. Later in life, I learned that those grapes could have been used to make more than jelly, but my grandmother was a strict Baptist and making anything but jelly was strictly forbidden!

Vineyards are common in the Middle East, just as they were when Jesus lived there. Trust me, they make more than jelly with the grapes there, though.

Because vineyards were so common, Jesus used them as a teaching tool. This was not uncommon because he frequently used images from their everyday lives to help them understand eternal truths. Vineyards were also utilized by the prophets to speak of Israel's relationship to God and their responsibility to be fruitful.

The prophets were often critical of Israel, referring to them as a choice vine that became a wild vine through self-indulgence and blind ambition. They were guilty of the same misbehavior of the very people they were called to influence.

In John 15, Jesus returned to the image of a vine to shift the attention away from his leaving them and toward their relationship after he was gone. This was why he made multiple references, eight in all, to abiding in him as he abided in the Father and in them. He might be leaving, but their relationship would not end. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, they could stay connected and continue the work they had begun, building healthy communities.

How does this passage, the last of Jesus' seven “I am” sayings in John, speak to us today? I think it emphasizes the importance of relationships and community. Who we are connected to and associate with will determine where we go and what we do. The people we associate with will either bring the best or the worst out in us, and for this reason we need to carefully choose our traveling companions along our journey.

What is the goal in this passage? What is it Jesus wanted of his disciples? He wanted them to bear fruit. Six times he mentioned this and ended this discourse by saying, “My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples” John 15:8.

What did he mean by “bearing fruit”? He wanted them to use their time, talents, resources and opportunities to make the world better. He wanted them to be good neighbors by following in his footsteps: pursuing justice, promoting peace, entering into others' struggles, bringing them into community and ushering people into the presence of God.

He knew they could not do this on their own. They needed him, his Father and one another. They were not created to live in isolation and would fail if they tried. This was why he used the image of the vine.

Grapes grew because they were connected to a branch, a vine, strong roots, fertile soil and had a vinedresser that provided the attention the grapes needed to grow. If grapes needed all these things, how much more did they?

Healthy relationships, according to Jesus, were crucial for the disciples' growth just as it was his own. This was why he surrounded himself with women and men who could help him accomplish his mission. He knew that everyone was created for community because they were created in the image of a triune God, whose very essence, Father, Son and Spirit, is loving community.

So let me ask you. **To whom do you need to be connected in order to grow, mature and bear fruit?** I'll tell you who I need to be connected to in order to bear fruit.

I need to be connected to God. Just as the vine grower in this passage was good to and for the vineyard, so is God good to me and good for me. He provides the wisdom, guidance, confidence and patience I need to bear fruit. He helps me to get rid of those things in my life that hinder growth and even forgives me when growth has not occurred.

How do I connect with God? I do it through faith in Christ and becoming his disciple. When I order my life as he did his, I find myself in the very places where God is at work in the world and have a personal encounter with Him. In the words of the Old Testament prophets, especially Jeremiah, and our gospel writer, John, I have found Jesus to be the "true" vine that keeps me from becoming a "wild" vine.

I need to be connected to teachers, encouragers and good role models. I need people in my life that will help me to think straight and live right. The people around me provide the fertile soil and deep roots I need to bear fruit. They are the ones that help me see dead branches that need to be pruned and the potential for more growth.

Where do I find people like this? One place is the church. I have been in church all my life and have found in this community of faith some of the most loving, encouraging and helpful people along my journey. Where would I be without them? I do not know because I do not know life without them. I am just grateful for each and every one of them.

When you see a turtle on a fence post, you know it did not get there by himself. That's how I feel. I am who I am and where I am by the grace of God and good friends in church.

I need to be connected to colleagues and friends outside the church to bear fruit. I believe that every person along our journey can be a teacher and help us understand life better. I have some of the finest friends in ministry and friends from all walks of life that open my eyes, my heart and my mind. How grateful I am to see life through their eyes. They have taught me so much.

"My own eyes are not enough," said C.S. Lewis, "I must see through the eyes of others." That's how my heart beats, too.

I need to be connected to family. Some of my family provides me roots, others are the vine and then some are the branches. All of them have provided nourishment in a soil rich with history and heritage. I feel so complete and in tact because they are in my life. Where would I be without them? I really don't know and am grateful I never will.

Who do you need in your life to bear fruit? In his article, "Created for Community," Gregory Boyd writes, "We all need people who are committed to loving and serving and who are committed to loving and serving us. We all need people who are close enough to us to notice when we're discouraged and who care enough to take time to encourage us. We all need people who can spot areas of weakness in our lives and care enough to confront us in love. We all need people who notice when we're going astray and who care enough to hold on to us. We all need a community that helps us revolt against those dominant aspects of our culture that are inconsistent with the kingdom life. All of us need a community of people with whom we can share the joys, sorrows, victories and defeats of ordinary life. Community is essential for our wholeness and for kingdom effectiveness and it is essential if we are to reflect the communal love of the triune God in our life."

Who are the vine and branches in your life? Who brings out the best in you? Who is helping you prune dead branches and see potential for growth? Are you cultivating those relationships? Have you thanked them lately?

Do you need to make some changes? Are you connected to the wrong people or maybe not connected to enough good people?

In his book, The Great Divorce, C.S. Lewis envisioned hell as a realm in which people are forever moving farther away from one another. Is this happening to you? What do you need to do about it? Do you need to connect to this church? Is this a place where you could encounter

God, find community, grow and mature in your faith and bear fruit? I want you to know that I believe Smoke Rise is good soil, rich and fertile. Come plant your life in it.

Do you need to reach out to someone that is slipping away and needs to make some changes? Could you make a difference in that person's life and help them bear fruit?

I was intrigued by an article I read in last Wednesday's paper about Michael Vick, the former Falcon quarterback. He will be released from prison soon after serving a twenty-three month sentence for his role in a dog fighting operation and hopes to get back into the NFL. Guess who reached out to him and met with him last week? Tony Dungy did, the recently retired coach of the Indianapolis Colts and Super Bowl winner in 2007. Dungy is not only one of football's most successful coaches, but also one of its finest. He is a committed Christian and faithful disciple of Christ.

I have no idea what they talked about, but can speculate. I imagine at some point in the conversation they talked about the people that Vick needed in his life if he was going to write a new chapter to his story and be productive. I would be willing to say Dungy talked about the importance of faith, family and friends.

Do you, like Tony Dungy, need to seek someone out and have a talk with them? Who needs you to be their vinedresser, their vine, fertile soil or strong roots? Will you reach out to them this week even as you thank God for all the people who have made a difference in your life? I assure you that you will not go alone. Jesus will be with you every step of the way.