

Branches of the True Vine

By
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from the pulpit of
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1 John 4:7-14

⁷Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. ¹³By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world.

John 15:1-8

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.

³You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.

⁵I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

Each year in the Fall, we celebrate the Third Graders by presenting them with a Bible. Having read picture books of Bible stories as younger children, we recognize that Third Graders are becoming good readers, and having their own Bibles is a rite of Christian formation. Pastor Rachel invites their parents, the pastoral and music staff, and their Sunday School teachers, to submit a favorite verse of scripture which volunteers then highlight in each child's Bible. Some common treasured passages – like Psalm 23 and the Lord's Prayer - are also marked along with the chosen verses from family and church friends. This reading from John's gospel is the one I typically choose: *I am the Vine, you are the branches.*

It is from one of my favorite passages of scripture. Larry and I chose it for our wedding ceremony. I find it naturally beautiful and evocative. Christ the Vine is grounded in the love of God. We are connected to God through Christ. God's love flows into us, and we grow in love. Branches left untended can become a tangled mess and can cease to produce fruit. But the promise of this text is that even though we may need pruning from time to time, or course correction and redirection, God promises to tend us so as to nurture our growth.

Now, of course, I do not expect a Third Grader to make all of those connections, at least, at first. But my hope is the Vine and Branches image of God's love nurturing us, can be for us a living metaphor. Because faith in God is indeed a living thing that grows, blooms, and bears fruit. It also goes through seasons when it withers and lies dormant, and only with the passage of time will enjoy another spurt of growth again. *I am the Vine, you are the branches.* We grow out of God's love made known to us through the Risen Christ. Then we bear the fruit of God's love through our discipleship. It is a metaphor worth clinging to, especially when faith may feel like it's waning or when full and abundant love feels elusive.

Just over a month ago, in mid-March, the author Dan Wakefield died. His was that day's headline obituary in the *New York Times* under the banner: *Dan Wakefield, Multifaceted Writer on a Spiritual Journey, Dies at 91*. He was a prolific novelist, screenwriter and journalist who began his career covering the Civil Rights Movement, the Emmet Till murder trial, and the societal fissures and wounds that the Viet Nam War etched in American society. He published twenty books over his long career. Despite his considerable success, Wakefield said he suffered from a spiritual emptiness, and at points in his life turned to drugs to fight off what he described as "a sense of blank, nameless pain in the pit of my very being." Having been raised in the Presbyterian church, he ventured toward atheism, but that *nameless pain* caused him to embark on a spiritual journey which took him back to the church. That quest is the focus of his memoir entitled *Returning: A Spiritual Journey*, a book that was formative for me in the early years of my ministry.

During his season of returning to faith, Dan Wakefield had an encounter with the famed Catholic priest, professor and theologian, Henri Nouwen. He was invited to a luncheon with Nouwen arranged by James Carroll, another priest turned novelist. Wakefield had just read Nouwen's book, *Prayers from Genesee*, which is a frank account of Nouwen confronting his own questions of faith and how, despite his theological training, he struggled mightily with his own life of prayer. Wakefield remembered that Nouwen was in an irritable mood that day, and yet he was as full of questions as any new convert would be in the presence of one with the religious stature of Henri Nouwen. Wakefield recalled the awkward encounter writing: "Henri turned his intimidating gaze on me, and I mustered up the nerve to blurt out one of my six million questions. "Father Nouwen, I've read your book, *Prayers from Genesee*. What bothers me is that if someone as advanced as you has doubts and difficulties with prayer, what hope is there for someone like me who is just starting out?" Nouwen looked at me sternly and said, rather sharply, "Mr. Wakefield, Christianity is not for 'getting your life together!'"

Dan Wakefield was taken aback. “Was I getting it all wrong?” he reflected later. “In a way, yes. Nouwen was telling me that Christianity was not simply another scheme for the never-ending satisfaction of the self, that it went beyond an ego trip of individual enlightenment to the service of others, to the giving up of self. Christianity offered a journey that was not just sweetness and light but also thundering darkness and doubt. Later,” Wakefield said, Nouwen’s stern remark came to seem like the greatest comfort to me. When, in spite of all my efforts, I still had not gotten my life together,” I realized that it didn’t necessarily mean I was not a Christian.”¹ He wrote that he came to realize that Christian faith is not at all about ‘getting your life together,’ so much as it is about connection and growth.

To say *I believe in Jesus Christ* is to say, I am connected to God through him. I need the love and mercy, the forgiveness and grace of God to be who I am meant to be... I am not fully who I am meant to be - on my own. Using the natural image of our being branches connected to the Vine, I think this is what Jesus is talking about in this lesson from John's gospel.

Biblical scholar, Gail O’Day, said of this passage of scripture: “The vine image provides the crowning symbol for the life of a community who lives out the love that Jesus shared. The intermingling of the branches in the vine, and the gardener’s attentive care to the fruitfulness of the branches, create the quintessential visual image of the life of the Christian community -- that is shaped by love and grounded in God’s presence.”²

You see, a nurtured connection to God the Vinegrower through Jesus Christ, the True Vine, is key to our individual spiritual health and

¹ David Stout, “Dan Wakefield, Multifaceted Writer on a Spiritual Journey, Dies at 91,” *New York Times*, 3/14/24, and, Dan Wakefield “Spiritual Impact: Encounters with Henri Nouwen,” *The Christian Century*, March 19-26, 1997, p. 301.

² Gail O’Day, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol IX, p. 759.

To the vitality of the community. Individual branches grow out of the vine but, as O'Day observed, it is in our intermingling, in community and our corporate witness that allows for God's love to be made known in the world. And, just as Dan Wakefield came to realize on his spiritual journey and return to church, we are not meant to be perfect in sharing this hard work of spreading God's love. We depend on divine pruning - call it forgiveness, mercy, judgment, grace - that allows us to bear fruit.

This week, among the many things that have occupied the news, have been the protests against the war in Gaza on university campuses. I imagine many of us have found them both understandable and disconcerting. These young adults are passionately protesting for peace and by in large peaceably. We can appreciate the anti-war sentiment which many of us hold ourselves, but some of the anti-Semitism that has accompanied these protests is concerning. But holding what is good of these demonstrations for peace together with this passage of scripture in mind, I remembered the academic research of Sharon Parks to understand the motivations of young adults. Her book titles describe the passion of her understanding emerging adults and their commitments.

Among them: *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams* and *Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World*.

Specializing in young adult studies and their search for meaning, Parks led a group of scholars to interview a hundred young adults who were working to make a difference for the common good. The research sought to discover what it was within these young people that ignited a fire for good causes. She and her research colleagues determined that part of the answer was deceptively simple. These young people share three things in common. First, each had a strong sense of self-identity. They knew their gifts and their growing edges. Second, each had a compelling vision for what the world should be like, and knew the barriers and structures that prevented a better vision from becoming a reality. The third characteristic this group shared was surprising. The research discovered that the individuals interviewed typically referred to a symbol or image, something beyond themselves and something

transcendent in nature that guided their thinking.³

A symbol... an image... something transcendent that provided a guiding vision for making this world a better place where abundant life is available to all. Here's one of the best images I know of: *I am the True Vine*, Jesus says, *you are the branches*. May it be for us, a key transcendent image, that enables us to cling to the Source of all love, to grow in faith and to share God's love wherever the world is yearning for the growth and nurture, the peace and abundant life. The life God wants for all of humankind.

AMEN.

³ Parks study cited in *The Worshipping Life*, Lisa Nichols Hickman, p. 42.