

**Sunday, May 2, 2021**  
**Sermon: Spiritual Pruning**  
**Pastor Adam Ericksen**  
**Clackamas United Church of Christ**

I AM THE VINE,  
YOU ARE THE BRANCHES



**John 15:1-8**

One of the ancient questions of Christianity that you have probably heard about before, or at least you've heard the answer in one way or another, is the question of Christmas, the question of the incarnation at Christmas. We celebrate God becoming human in the baby Jesus and progressive Christians tend to not know what to do with this incarnation question. Because as

Brandon talked about earlier, we have been given bad answers. I'm trying to get away from saying that some answers are bad and some answers are good, but I'm struggling because I think that we have been given bad answers and harmful answers, and as Brandon prayed earlier today, abusive answers. And one of those answers that has become dominant among Christianity actually came pretty late in Christian history, but we're told that it is the traditional answer. This answer is not traditional. It's actually very late and that answer is that God became human in Jesus essentially to go to the cross and channel God the father's wrath upon Jesus to save us, or at least those of us who believe in this scheme from the wrath of the father. That for me, and I'm assuming from what I know from Brandon, has been an answer to this question that was actually formed in that way in the 16th and 17th centuries mostly by a man named John Calvin.

If you have been given that answer, I want you to know that that answer is not an answer you have to believe in, or an answer that I think you should believe in. In fact, I think it's an answer you should reject because it is abusive. God is not wrathful at you. God loves you. God always responds to us with love. God comes to us as the spirit of love, the spirit of forgiveness, the fundamental reality of the universe, according to First John, is that God is love. That's who God is. So why did God become flesh in the person, Jesus? The answer that actually is traditional Christianity is not in order to take God's wrath upon himself. The answer that ancient Christianity gives us is that God became flesh. God became human so that humans might become God.

You might think about it a different way. This is what they meant - not that we might have the powers of God, to have the ultimate powers of God to do whatever we want. That's traditionally what we think of the powers of God, but what they came up with in this formula was that God became human so that humans might participate in the divine life that we might become God-like. And how do we know what God is like? Through Jesus, that's how we know what God is like.

Jesus, the one who calls us to love one another including even those that we call our enemies. Jesus, the one who calls us to enter into a world that seems so hell-bent on violence and exclusion, and bring with us the ultimate love of God. Sometimes that is risky. Jesus went to the cross not to appease the wrath of God, but Jesus went to the cross because of human wrath. Because we often deal with one another in wrathful and violent ways and that's how humans dealt with Jesus. Jesus went to the cross in order to show us the extent

of God's love. That even when we put God in human form on the cross, God responds with love and says father forgive them for they know not what they do. Now this forgiveness is not just a letting things go. This forgiveness is rooted in challenging these very systems of violence, these very powers that lead us to not be inclusive.

As we saw in the children's sermon, the vine that's filled with grapes, more grapes than you could imagine could fit on the vine. That is the radical inclusiveness of God. Everyone belongs. More people than you can imagine belong. That is what the Kingdom of God is like, inviting more and more and more people in and learning to live with one another in this crowded space. There's not a lot of room on that vine, but we are called to learn to live in relationships of love and compassion. Yes, there will be conflicts and we move through those conflicts not in order to defeat one another, but to love one another.

What does all of this have to do with Jesus? In the Gospel of John, chapter 15, when he talks about himself as the vine and we are the branches, this metaphor that Jesus uses is precisely what the early church came up with. How do we participate in the divine life? Well, it's as if we are branches that are rooted in the vine of God, in the vine of Jesus. Where do we get this life from? Not on our own. I don't know about you, but on my own I struggle. I struggle a lot more. I need people like Amira in my life. I need people like you in my life to continue to remind me who I am.

In our western world, we tend to think of ourselves as individuals, as people who should not be connected to a vine. But as people, who can - you've heard it before - pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. That is a myth. None of us have our own bootstraps. We've all been given bootstraps from others, from our parents, from our friends. None of us have our own bootstraps and when we pretend that we do, our lives become less fulfilled.

In a world that prizes western individuality, which has a place, I'm not saying individual things don't have a place, but when we only emphasize our individuality we cut ourselves off from the vine that Jesus talks about, from a sense of community. So, when Jesus says that he is the vine, he's talking with his disciples and he tells his disciples to stay with me, stay rooted in my vine because here is where we will find radical life together.

Now, this can be troubling because this passage can feel very exclusive, but here's what I want you to know about the Gospel of John - John begins in chapter one by talking about the word of God becoming flesh. This goes back to the ancient church. Why did God become flesh? Why did the word of God become flesh in the person of Jesus? To invite us to participate in the divine life of love, the ever flowing love that flows through the universe. Participate in that. This is not exclusive. This is not exclusionary. This is radically inclusive and, in fact, in John chapter 1 it says that the word became flesh and the word is the light of the world. The light of the world. Now we could look to John chapter 15 where Jesus says that I am the vine and we could look at that in a very exclusive way. We could look at that and say Jesus is the only vine, the only vine is Jesus and so all other religions, all other philosophies are not the vine. You could look at this in an exclusive way, but I think that is missing the point. Why? Because in the beginning of the Gospel of John, the word is the light of the world. It is not just a vine. The vine is Jesus' metaphor for his specific followers. Stay attached to the vine. But the metaphor that we have at the beginning of John is the most beautiful thing that I can think of. God is the light of the world and you cannot contain the light of the world. No religion can contain the light of the world. No person, and I want you to hear this, not even Jesus can contain the light of the world. Jesus would

not want to contain the light of the world. He was not selfish like that. The light of the world is everywhere. It is in Christianity, yes. I have seen the light of the world in Buddhism, in Judaism, in Islam. I have seen the light of the world in our atheist friends. The light shines. Jesus says in the Gospel of John that the spirit of God is like the wind. It blows wherever it wills. Once we start trying to grasp and contain the wind that is God, that is the spirit, or the light that is God in the spirit, can you imagine that somebody trying to like grasp onto light as if we own the light? As Rhonda and Dave and Jeff sang earlier, you cannot own the sunlit sky.

None of us can own God. None of us can own God. None of us can own the vine that is Christ. What if that vine has grapes on it that are not just Christian grapes, but what if they're also Muslim grapes and Jewish grapes and atheist grapes and God says to just be grapes together! That is a vision and a version of Christianity that I can be proud of, that I can get on board with.

I want to leave you with this - Jesus says that if you stick to the vine, that is the word of God, that is the light of God, that is Jesus, you will bear more fruit. Sometimes the gardener comes in and does the gardening, does the pruning, so that we can bear more and more and more fruit. That's the point of this and so sometimes suffering happens in our lives and we go through it together. And as we go through it together, we bear more and more fruit.

I'm feeling that now as we mourn the loss of our dear sister, Kate. I went to Kate's Facebook page just to see that maybe, like almost of us, we hoped that this news was not true. And I could call her and she would tell me that it was wrong, that she is here. But I went to her page and this was the last thing that she posted – talk about bearing fruit – it was a meme that said this: “If you are out in public and you can't figure out a stranger's gender, follow these steps: 1) Don't worry about it.” There's only one step, don't worry about it. That was a meme from our friends at the Transgendering Project and it was the last post that our dear sister, Kate, had posted. That was Kate. At the beginning of the pandemic, Kate came to me and said, “Why don't we give out free masks to anybody in need? We can put them up on the trees outside of the church and put a message on our sign that says: ‘Free Masks, God Loves You, We love you. Love, Your Neighbor.’” And here is a picture of Kate wearing her mask, bearing amazing fruit in her life.

That is what this is all about. God became human that we might participate in the life of God. Jesus calls himself the vine and says to stay attached to the vine so that you can be nourished with one another as you live the divine life of love with one another, and with strangers, and possibly even with your enemies, as hard as that is. That was the life of Kate. That is the life that we are called to live together and may we live that life together now and forevermore. Amen