

John 15:1-11
"Branching Out"
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In real estate, they say, it's all about "Location – Location – Location."

The same can be said of our passage this morning.

Scholars have debated where this final "I Am" saying of Jesus originally was placed in the context of John's gospel.

The problem exists because Chapter 14:31, Jesus says to the disciples, "Rise, Let us be on our way."

Then, instead of rising and being on their way, Jesus goes into this dialogue.

Jesus and the disciples do not get across the Kidron Valley and into the garden until chapter 18:1.

It could be that chapters 15-17 were spoken on the road by Jesus to the disciples, but scholars believe this to be a fanciful thought.

It could be that chapter 15 is placed originally before chapter 14 in earlier manuscripts then later moved- probably by an accidental copying error.

It could be that chapters 15-17 were added later by the same author/editor or another editor of the same community.

Regardless of the uncertainty behind the original location of this text within the greater text, the final placement or context of this "I am the true vine" saying of Jesus is the Upper Room. This conversation occurs before Jesus' betrayal and arrest; and before his subsequent trial and crucifixion.

Yet, while we can't be sure why it arrived in this location within John's gospel, we can be assured that it has a purpose and placement here for some specific reason.

So, I'll tell you what came to my mind as I read about this passage.

I think it went like this, Jesus just finished the upper room discourse. They ate the meal. He gave the meal new meaning:

"This bread is my body given for you, do this in remembrance of me."

"This cup is the new covenant sealed in my blood, shed for the forgiveness of sins, as often as you do this, do so remembering me."

He washes the disciples' feet in that room showing them what it means to humbly serve.

He tells Judas to go do what it is that Judas needs to do, and Judas goes.

He gives the remaining eleven disciples the new commandment to love one another as Christ has loved them.

He tells them not to let their hearts be troubled because in God's house there are many rooms and Christ will lead them to the room prepared.

They share a special, intimate time together there in the Upper Room during the festival of Passover.

And then he says, "Rise, Let us be on our way."

As they are standing to leave, Jesus glances over to the cup he had blessed earlier – the cup he shared with his disciples – his friends and he thinks about what they just did. He thinks about how in that cup wine is the product of that which grows on the vine and it hits Jesus, "one more teaching moment."

So, he gave the disciples that look and tone of voice they had come to know – a look and intonation that told them they had better get comfortable because the teacher was going to teach.

They sat. And Jesus taught. And together they got one final piece of wisdom that would serve them well when they were called to go out and begin the first church movement on Pentecost. And I say Pentecost because when we look at the placement of this discourse within the context of John's whole gospel – remembering that location is everything – we see that the preceding paragraph of Scripture (John 14:25-31) – Jesus tells the disciples, "I have told you these things while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you." (14:25-26)

So, I think that by placing this "I Am" saying of Jesus here amid Holy Spirit discourse is John's strategic way of reminding disciples that on Pentecost – when the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples empowering them to take the good news into all the world – perhaps the very first words they remembered were, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower."

These would be appropriate words to remember because they are about the church – about God's gathered community – they are about the real reason behind church growth – it's not about numbers – it's not about presentation...it's about final product.

It has a great deal to do with what wine growers call "canopy management."

Canopy management addresses the topic of runaway growth.

Vines left to themselves will sprawl out all over the place and produce huge canopies of shoots, leaves and branches.

Wine tasters say that if you catch a flavor "reminiscent of onion skin and jalapeño peppers," you've just encountered the problem of canopy management.

Unless the canopy is controlled, the vine won't yield much fruit let alone high-quality grapes.

It feels counter-intuitive to cut back the canopy because to the eye everything is doing just fine. All the greenery and leaves suggest you've got a very healthy vine.

A vine with a huge canopy may be good looking, but it isn't doing any good.

A huge canopy is described by some in the industry as, "all show and no tell."

This morning's text deals with canopy management.

Jesus says, "He [the gardener - God] removes every branch that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit." (v. 2)

For wine-makers, runaway growth can be a real problem – it can also be a potential trap for all faith communities – the 1st century church and the 21st century church are both susceptible to thinking about numbers more than what the church's call is – to bear good fruit.

We must avoid falling prey to thinking constantly "let's get as many people in here as possible" – "the more the better" – and yes I'll agree that on one level part of our great commission is to take this gospel message to the farthest reaches of the world so that all might hear the good news of Christ's love – that said, we must be careful to not sacrifice quality Christ-like living at the expense of being the biggest game in town.

It's not about numbers for numbers sake – it's about lives being changed by the gospel of God's grace revealed in Jesus the Christ.

About twelve years ago, we expanded our Sunday morning worship schedule in an effort that more folks might have a chance to hear the good news of God's amazing love at work in this world – the hope was that those lives will be changed – we did not do so at the expense of a watered-down theology or a failure to encourage the gathered community to live out this faith in their daily lives.

What good is the message if we don't share it with the world?

More importantly, what good is that message, if it isn't any different or any better than what the world is already offering?

In his words to us today, Jesus is concerned that the disciples might face similar problems.

He is not interested in showy discipleship.

The Christian life isn't about putting on a good "outward" show for the world.

The Christian life is about allowing others to see how the grace of God has changed our lives and is continuing to change our lives.

The Christian life is about having our joy completed by having Christ's joy at work within us.

One of the best compliments we could ever hear as Christians is "you're living with joy today."

Joy-filled living is a result of being connected to the community.

This is what vine imagery is all about.

The image of the vine is used often in Scripture as a metaphor for the relationship between God and God's people.

Israel is described as the "vineyard of the Lord Almighty" in Isaiah 5.

Jesus picks up this image in John 15 as he describes his relationship to his disciples.

Notice that Jesus doesn't call the vine to growth.

Jesus calls it to bear fruit.

When God takes pruning shears to our lives or the church it's not an issue of whether we are growing, rather what are we bearing.

While a sour grape is a fruit, it's still sour – God doesn't need more sour grapes.

God is interested in a superior product.

Jesus is interested in fruit – and not just any kind of fruit – excellent fruit...quality fruit...fruit that makes an impact in this world because it is "oh so good."

So the questions become:

What kind of fruit are we bearing in this world?

What kind of pruning do we need in our lives so that the fruit we bear is good?

What can we do to introduce others to the vinegrower so their lives might be transformed?

The grapevine is really about community – many individual branches interconnected, intertwined & reaching outward.

Jesus spoke to his disciples about proper canopy control so that we might produce fruit that is a "complement" or "friend to faith."

What are we doing to work with God to be who Gd needs us to be?

I don't know, however, I'm willing to find out.

To God be the glory now and always.

Alleluia & Amen.