

Text: John 15:5-8. Vine and Branches, growing closer to Jesus. **August 13, 2017.**

God's grace is yours through Jesus, the true vine. Amen.

"I didn't know those people before. Saw them at church. Said hello. But now I know them really well. They are such awesome people." "I can't believe how many people came to the benefit for my daughter. I was in tears. These people really do love me." "When our Vine and Branches group first got together, we chatted for a while, kind of stalled and hesitated before getting into the sermon discussion. Now we dig right in. We can't wait to talk about God's Word." I know. Maybe those sound like infomercial testimonials for Vine and Branches. But that's what people really said. People are excited to be talking about God's Word. People are excited to get to know their fellow Christians. People are excited to show Christ's love in their lives. That's what Vine and Branches is all about, growing closer to Jesus, growing closer to each other, bearing much fruit.

Christ uses the picture of vine and branches to show the importance of staying connected to Christ, staying connected to each other and bearing much fruit. But we aren't so familiar with a literal vine and branches. I suppose we know what they are, but what's the point? Why would Jesus use vine and branches to show the importance of staying connected to him? Actually, I was happy I got to study this, because there are so many reasons and so many connections with vine and branches and our relationship to Jesus. First, vines were extremely common in the land of Palestine. The sunny climate and dewy nights were perfect. So when Jesus referred to vine and branches, people knew what he was talking about. They could see them on just about any hillside.

Vines were hard work. You often had to clear a hillside of rocks to be able to plant vines. You used these boulders to terrace the hillside and provide some space for the vines to grow. You had to build a watchtower to prevent thieves from stealing and animals from devouring your crops. Then you had to cultivate and prune the vines so all the energy of the plant went toward the very best branches that could yield the most fruit. And you had to wait several years after planting before you harvested any crop. It was the most labor-intensive form of agriculture. What a reminder of all the hard work Christ has done for you! Christ cleared your heart of the rocks of sin, pulverizing those sins with the powerful fire hose of baptism. Christ has provided Christian friends and family to watch over you and prevent the devil from stealing that precious fruit of faith from your heart. Christ constantly prunes the sin from your life. Maybe Christ lets you experience the results of sin so you learn to avoid it in the future. Maybe he lets pain come into your life to draw you closer to him. Christ, the vine, has put a lot of work into you, precious branches!

Vineyard owners did all this hard work because grape vines are hardy plants, once they get established. Their thin roots can slither down deep and find the tiniest crevices between the rocks and gain nourishment from the smallest amount of soil. In the same way, the vine of Christ's love slithers into the deepest parts of your heart and soul. Grape vines can grow where it seems impossible for anything to grow. Just like it seemed impossible for Christ's love to plant in my sinful heart. It seemed impossible, but not for Christ! Think of that friend who is rough around the edges. Impossible for Christ's love to plant in their heart? Not at all. Also, because the roots of grape vines are so deep, the plants can last for centuries, what seems like an eternity. Do I even have to tell you the connection between Christ and us? When he plants his word in your heart, plants faith in you, you will live for all eternity!

Finally, vines were symbols of peace and prosperity. You had to have a peaceful land to have time to tend the grapevines. One war could come along and the vines are destroyed. You had to have a prosperous land, where people could afford to wait for years before reaping a harvest. Christ brings peace to our hearts and prosperity for eternal life. See all the blessings? See all the connections between Christ, the vine and us, the branches?

And all these blessings come through our connection with Christ, our connection with the vine. Apart from me, you can do nothing. Apart from me you can do nothing. Apart from Christ, we can do nothing! But wait, I know people who go to work and do a good job and they don't have a connection with Christ! My neighbor's kids behave better than mine and they don't go to church. But Jesus isn't talking about outward, earthly stuff. Jesus is talking about spiritual, heavenly things. Apart from Christ, we can do nothing spiritually. Apart from Christ we are just dead in our sins. Without faith it is impossible to please God. We can't do anything good without being connected to Jesus. Apart from me, you can do nothing.

And yet we so often think that way. I have to go to work. I have to train my children. I can kick this sin if I just try hard enough. And that's like trying to vacuum without the vacuum cleaner plugged in. You can move around a lot. You can work up a sweat. But when you aren't plugged in, you can do nothing. When you aren't connected to Jesus, there's big trouble. **If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers.** While the roots of the vine are deep, the connection of the branch to the vine is always fragile, always in danger. One wind storm comes along and snap. We've seen wind storms lately. One loss of one loved one and we can think that God doesn't love us anymore and we can sever our connection with the vine. The word for branches talks about branches that are tender, flexible, easily separated from the vine. It may not be a big event. It may be a bunch of smaller ones that lead us to separate ourselves from the vine, from Jesus. It's summer. It's busy. We'll get back to church when school starts.

Then school starts. It's busy. Just a little time to enjoy the nice weather. We'll get back when winter starts. Then winter starts. It's too cold. The weather's bad. And you see what happens. Or we make it to church. It's a good hour to plan out the rest of your week. Is the sermon over already? Well, at least I was here. I didn't really listen and I won't remember a thing, but... And little by little we lose our connection, little by little we get severed from the vine.

What happens to such branches? **Such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.** Lose your connection to the vine, you lose your connection to Jesus. Lose your connection to Jesus and you will burn, forever, over and over and over. What else could Jesus be talking about but hell? I know that's harsh. That's just the truth.

See the importance of staying connected to Jesus? Jesus rescued us from the fire of hell. Jesus went to the cross, just for you. Jesus reached out his arms to wrap around you and stay connected to you. Forever! Jesus throws you the lifeline of his very body and blood to stay connected to you. Notice how Jesus says we stay connected to him. **If you remain in me and my words remain in you.** Do you see the word that keeps coming up? Remain. Remain. Remain. It's not enough to say, "I heard that in Sunday School." What about now? Are you remaining? I had that in Catechism class. I memorized all that stuff and now it's your turn. But have you remained in those words? Can you still recite even the ten commandments, the creed, with the meanings? My Christian friends, our connection to Jesus is our only hope, our only hope for forgiveness, peace, eternal life. That connection, that remaining, only happens through Jesus' words. Did you hear that? My words remain in you. We need to continue hearing God's Word. We need to remain in God's Word. We can't let Sunday School and Catechism class be the end. They are just the beginning of a lifetime of God's Word. Doesn't matter if you are just starting Bible 101 or if you've read the Bible 30 times, we all need to keep growing. We all need to remain in Jesus' words. That's how we get closer to Jesus.

This special sermon on Vine and Branches is aimed at helping you do just that: remain in Jesus' words. You probably noticed the Vine and Branches display, the banner. They are hard to miss. Vine and Branches is about growing closer to Jesus and growing closer to each other by having small groups of people get together regularly to discuss the words of Jesus we heard in the sermon. That way the sermon isn't just a fifteen minute nap, but fifteen minutes of remaining in Jesus' words. The sermon isn't then just fifteen minutes for one day. The words of Jesus we hear in the sermon become part of every day. When you have the chance to gather with fellow Christians and discuss what you heard, that connection to Jesus grows deeper, the branch is more solidly connected to the vine. The branches get better connected to each other. Think of how much more attention you might pay to the sermon if you are getting together to discuss it later this week. Think of how much more you will be motivated to check out the sermon on our website: rlcverona.org to be ready for that discussion. Think of how much more deeply the words of Jesus will enter your heart, apply to your life when you learn from your fellow Christians in a safe, judge-free, confidential atmosphere. The words of Jesus are not just for a few minutes on a Sunday morning. The words of Jesus give you life every day, every hour, every minute. That's really what Vine and Branches is all about: talking about Jesus' words to help you grow closer to Jesus.

I don't usually encourage people, from the pulpit, to sign up for some program at church. Maybe you don't want to see a movie about Martin Luther. Ok. Maybe knocking on doors isn't your thing. Alright. But Vine and Branches is different. Vine and Branches helps you grow closer to Jesus. That's every Christian's thing. Vine and Branches helps you grow closer to each other. There's no guilt to sign up. There's just joy to get closer to Jesus. There's no pressure. There's just people waiting for you to get closer to them. There's no bad looks if you don't sign up. There's just bearing fruit when you do. Those who are in Vine and Branches are glad they are. Those who did sign up are happy they did. Give it a try. Be part of Vine and Branches. Amen.