

**ACTS 8:26-40 (p. 890)**

**MAY 2, 2021**

**JOHN 15:1-8 (p. 876)**

**BLAINE**

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

Lighten our load Lord, by Enlightening our hearts. Turn our worries and fears into Heaven-Filled Joy as we center our lives on you. Cause us to hear your Voice—your Spirit’s guiding whisper—calling out to us by name. And then Empower us to faithfully follow, bearing much Fruit along the way. We ask this in Jesus’ Name. Amen.

**“PRUNING SEASON”**

Four or five years ago, at one of those Clergy Conferences, the Presenter shared a story with a real kernel of truth. He talked about officiating at a Military Memorial service. An extremely formal affair! For a General! A beloved veteran! Over a thousand people were in attendance! The service was held at one of those elegant, downtown Washington D. C. Cathedrals too. And the General had left specific instructions for what he wanted.

In addition to Full-Military Honors, at the close of the service, the Pastor was to lead an Honor Guard—complete with flags and rifles, along with a score of High-Ranking Military Officers—down the center aisle in a solemn procession. They were to stop at the casket for a moment of silent remembrance. And then all proceed out through a side door, into a glass-enclosed atrium, where they’d kneel together in prayer, as the congregation looked on. The effect would have been dramatic! Except for one thing! As the Pastor led the procession down the aisle, up to the casket, and out through the door, he discovered that they were in a Broom Closet rather than the Atrium, from which they had to make a hasty retreat!

You know, I think I like that story because I can see myself doing something like that. And the Speaker, in sharing it, was noticeably embarrassed! His point though, if I remember correctly, was that in Ministry, there are going to be times when you'll run into unexpected situations! And I can tell you, that is so true! But the take home for me that day was, "If you are going to follow someone, you better make sure they know where they're going"!

Last week, Jesus said, "I am the Good Shepherd. My sheep know my voice and they follow me." And I'm going to assume, that as a Believer, you trust that Jesus knows where He is going! But today He says, "I am the True Vine and you are the Branches. If you remain in me, I will remain in you." Following is one thing, right? You can do that from a safe distance! But to abide, to stay close, to remain near, to Jesus, you have to be there in the first place, don't you?

You've heard me, often, talk about how context is critical. So, given the context of this particular lesson, how important would you say it is? Just prior to our reading, Jesus and the Disciples were in the Upper Room. There was that Foot Washing thing, remember? And all that talk about leaving soon. The Disciples shared the Passover together. And now they are heading to the Garden of Gethsemane for Prayer. They're walking through the darkened streets of the city, wondering what all this means. Jesus knows what awaits Him. Over the next few hours, He will be betrayed by His friend Judas, and arrested by an angry mob. Time is short! This entire section of John's Gospel is one big "Goodbye Address"! So, given that, how important do you think what the Lord says here might be?

“I am the Vine, and you are the Branches. If you remain in me, if you abide in me, and I in you, then you will bear much Fruit.” Jesus uses the phrase, “I AM”! That’s really important! “I am the Vine”! He says the same thing that His Father said to Moses in Egypt, remember, when He was about to free them from captivity! Moses asked; “What if they ask me your Name Lord? What should I tell them? Who should I say you are?” And God answers, “tell them I AM”! The phrase, in Greek, is “ego eimi”! And it carries a timeless tense! Chronology is important in Greek. Ask Pastor David. Most Greek words are limited to either past, present, or future tense! But this “I AM” phrase has a timeless meaning! And therefore, eternal significance!

This is Jesus’ last “I AM” statement, by-the-way. This is the Lord’s final, earthly declaration! Jesus has already declared, “I AM the Light of the World” (John 8:12), and “I AM the Bread of Life” (John 6:35), “I AM the Way” (John 14:6), and “I AM the Door” (John 10:9). Last week Jesus said, “I AM the Good Shepherd, I know my sheep and my sheep know Me” (John 10:14)! Scholars tell us that these great, “I AM” statements by Jesus, are strong affirmations of His association with the Father! They actually declare His Deity! So, given that context...?

And now, on the night before His Crucifixion, Jesus declares, “I AM the Vine”. How important do you think that conversation might be? “I am the True Vine, and you are the Branches.” “My Father is the Gardener, and He will cut off every Branch that bears no Fruit! And prune those that do!” There is interconnectedness, isn’t there? A bond. A relationship. And clearly, consequences!

It was springtime in Jerusalem, so maybe the group was walking past a vineyard? Or maybe Jesus had just stopped to pick up a trimmed-off branch from an Olive tree? Maybe they have just passed by the Great Temple, which had an image of Grape Vines carved on the door? Or went out of the city through the Golden Gate on their way to the Kidron Valley, which had a similar picture engraved on its door?

They would have known! The image that Jesus was painting in their minds would have been quite clear to the Disciples, in fact to anyone living in Israel at the time. Many folks were Farmers or Shepherds themselves, remember! And almost everyone lived within sight of a vineyard or two. It would be like us, here, in Northern Michigan with Cherry trees! Which by-the-way, have recently been pruned!

The Disciples are all faithful Jews as well. They would have instantly recognized the biblical theme. The Prophet Isaiah often described the “House of Israel” and the “Men of Judah” as the “Vineyard of the Lord”. And the Prophet Jeremiah called God’s People a “Choice Vine, a Vine of “sound and reliable stock”, one “planted by the Hand of God!” The Psalms even, what Historians call the Hymn Book of the Temple, are chocked clear full of Vineyard images! They would have known!

They have heard Jesus use numerous horticultural examples in His Parables already. “Workers in the Lord’s Vineyard”, “the Sowing of Seed in various types of Soil”, “an unproductive Fig Tree even, that withers at Jesus’ command”!

The Vineyard metaphors would have been easy to understand and relate too! Again, like for us here in Cherry Country! I wonder though if they grasped the magnitude of what Jesus was saying? And if we do?

“I am the True Vine, and you are the Branches”. I am the source of your strength, and the way you get nourished. Only through Me, can you stay grounded. I am what connects you to one another too, and the absolute only way in which you can ever bear Fruit. And therefore, in order to be productive, in any way, to have life even, you need to “remain in me”!

A couple of other translations say, “abide in me”. So, I looked up the Greek word. It’s “meno”. It carries a sense of “staying put”, of “remaining where you are found”, of “dwelling” or “lodging”, of “having a permanent home”! Remain in Me! Abide in Me! “Stay with me, live with Me, says Jesus! Dwell with Me! Exist in Me! Stay connected to Me!”

Which made me think of all the divisions lately—in our world, in our nation, in our lives! That’s one of the most effective tools of the “enemy”, you know! Separation from God! Separation from one another! I’m not saying that Politics, or COVID, even are from Satan. But I do think he is using them, don’t you? I mean, a lot of people are feeling separated right now!

Many have eaten more, and drank more over the last year and half. Many are spending an inordinate amount of time in front of the Television, or on Social Media! But how many of us have actually put in the effort to stay connected with Jesus? Or with others? Or for that matter, are doing so now? Remain in me!

The Disciples would have heard, “I have come to be with you, to make My home among you”! They would have visualized the Incarnation of Messiah, the Word becoming Flesh and dwelling among them! They would have immediately grasped the critical significance of what Jesus was saying! And given the fact that He has just told them that He is returning to the Father and they can’t follow just yet, this command to “make your Home with Me,” probably got their attention, don’t you think? Does it get ours though? I wonder!

Home is a pretty important place, don’t you think? Walk through any Hallmark store, or look at someone’s office, or desk. Better yet, glance at almost any refrigerator door, in almost any home, and you’ll quickly see how important family connections really are! You will see pictures and drawings, and awards and such, all from precious loved ones! You’ll find sayings like, “Home is Where the Heart is,” or “Home is where they always have to take you in,” or “There is no Place like Home”! You’ll discover an atmosphere of belonging, won’t you, a place of welcome! “Remain! Abide! Stay put with Me, and I will stay put with you!”

Plato, way back in the Fourth Century B.C. wrote, “the human animal, from the very first, seems to have an insatiable longing, a great desire for connection. The infant demands attention from the world, and insists on being noticed and served. The human cannot survive without making connections, first with the mother, and then with one human being after another.”

Sigmund Freud, a hundred years ago said, “A longing for connection is the very beginning of all human thought and culture, the explanation for all human achievement!” Apparently, we human beings we have a thing for each other! And apparently God, the maker of Heaven and Earth, has a thing for us! He even tells us to “remain in Him”!

And that’s a comforting thought, don’t you think, staying connected with Almighty God, walking hand-in-hand with the Lord! And when you stop to consider, it’s a lot of what we are called to do as the Church. This is the place where we abide with one another, and where we learn to abide in Christ. This is where we study the Scriptures and learn about our relationship with the Lord!

This is where we Worship together, and Pray together, and develop the habits and practices that help us stay connected to each other, and especially to the Resurrected Lord! This is home, folks, a place of rest and peace, of safety and security, of nurture and life! This, here, is the Vineyard image we see in today’s text! We are the plants, growing side-by-side! “I am the Vine”, says Jesus, “and you are the Branches. And when we stay connected, we will bear all kinds of Fruit!”

But there is a Converse thought, isn't there? If we don't abide in Him, if we don't continue to dwell with Him—if we grow apart, from each other, as well as from Him, or wander off—we will eventually wither and die! Without me, says the Lord, you are just a bundle of Fruitless Branches! And a Fruitless Branch, in case you've forgotten, is not only useless, but also sucks the life out of the rest of the Vine!

So, because I care about the whole Vineyard, because I'm concerned with the entire harvest, says the Lord, I will come along and cut off the dead weight and toss it into the fire! That's more than a bit troubling, isn't it? It is to me! This is a promise, but one with a very clear warning! This lesson of Jesus is a good news/bad news thing, isn't it! There is safety and security here in the Vineyard, a home for all time, if we so choose—where we can be vibrant, growing, beautiful Branches, who can ask the Father for whatever we wish! Did you catch that part of the text? It's verse seven. Or, we can be dead, shriveled up, Fruitless Branches, destined to be plucked away, destined for the flame! It's our choice! "Remain in Me, and I will remain you!"

What Jesus is describing here, is "Selective Pruning". Think about buying a packet of seeds and dumping the entire thing into the ground, covering it with dirt, watering and fertilizing it, and then just waiting to see what comes up! You wouldn't do that! Not if you want a decent harvest! That would have disappointing results, right! The instructions on the package clearly talk about thinning-out the new sprouts when they germinate. Otherwise, you'll only get a meager yield! The plants will ultimately compete for the precious nutrients in the ground, and completely choke-off the sunlight from each other.

Planting, like that, is a gross waste of seeds! If you don't thin, and prune, your plants won't bear much Fruit!

We see that too, here in Northern Michigan. Just look at how much work the farmers are doing right now, trimming back the Fruit trees. Every Orchard or Vineyard owner prunes, and cleans, and thins their plants! It's the only way to produce more Fruit! And all of those dead, useless Branches, are gathered up and tossed into the flame! They are not much good for anything else! The trimming fosters new growth and allows the production of better Fruit.

Just this week, I was trimming some grape vines on a trellis by my deck. I originally planted them for shade, which works, even if you let them grow untethered! But Deb, who is far wiser than I am, wants to see some Fruit on those vines! So, I had to do some work. I needed to cut back the unruly parts. And there were these "sucker shoots" starting to grow, tight little clusters that shouldn't be there. They tend to collect dirt and debris. They open up the plant to potential disease. If these shoots are allowed to grow, they will actually suck the life out of the rest of the vine! There will be leaves! The plant may look good, for a while. That is, until it withers and dies! And in the meantime, there won't be any Fruit! A Vineyard like that, is just "for show"!

And those unruly, "extra" branches weigh everything down! They will actually collect all kinds of stuff that shouldn't be there! Mine, for instance, gathered a bunch of snow this winter, and tore-down part of my pergola! It wasn't designed for that kind of weight!

“I am the True Vine,” declares the Lord, “and my Father is the Gardener. He cuts off every Branch in me that bears no Fruit, while every branch that does bear Fruit He prunes, so that it will be even more Fruitful.” And make note here, if you will. It’s the “Fruitful” Branches that get the pruning. All the “Non-Fruitful” Branches are just cut off and tossed away. It is the “Fruitful” Branches, which stay connected to the Vine, that get the care!

The Greek word for pruning here is *katharos*. It has the same root as the word “catharsis” or “cathartic”. It means to cleanse or purify. I wonder if that might change our perspective some? On burdens even? Is it possible that some of the difficult things that come our way are actually pruning, intended to cleanse and purify, designed to help us grow and produce even more Fruit? Could COVID be something like that?

Notice also that all of this Vineyard Care has a purpose! Verse eight says that the reason for this, “is for my Father’s Glory”! It’s not about production rates, is it, or yield-per-acre! It’s about honoring the Owner of the Farm! Not every Branch will produce the same amount of fruit! The quantity, or even the quality, is not the point! The Fruit, any Fruit, is intended for God’s Glory! And it’s not even up to you to produce the Fruit! Your job is to stay connected to the Vine! Because if you do, says Jesus, you WILL produce Fruit!

Obviously, I've been watching Orchards and Vineyards lately. And I couldn't help but start thinking about "grafting", particularly about being "grafted onto" the Body of Christ. Each one of our own little Branches, by design, will produce our own specific "type" of Fruit! We are diverse! But the life-giving nutrients all come from the same Vine! We have shared DNA flowing through us, the Power and Strength, the Life-Blood of the Holy Spirit! That's what enables us to produce the Fruit! But it will be the Fruit the Lord wants us to produce! So, stay connected! And let the Owner of the Vineyard deal with the Harvest!

I think it's pretty easy for most of us to stroll through the Vineyard and try to identify useless Branches. We see the dead weight, right, or think we do. And we want to prune, we do, so that the Fruit will blossom and grow! We might notice some "sucker shoots" draining away energy and resources—unproductive areas of the Vineyard! That's all fairly easy for us to see, if we pay attention! But the lesson in this text, the focus really, is not just on the Vineyard! It's always easy to throw stones at that! The Vineyard is big and bulky, and made up of "other people"! It's easy to throw stones at the Vineyard! Again, usually from far away! Only the lesson here, from Jesus, is actually on our own particular Branch! The command, then, hits much closer to home!

So, consider what might be "sprouting" in your life that needs to be cleaned out? Where might mold and decay be gathering around you? What healthy-looking "new shoots", or great big Branches that have been around a long time, are actually blocking out the Light of Son from where you currently stand?

Where might there be “too much foliage”, stuff that simply needs to be cut back, in order to not “suck the life” out of your particular Branch, or the Branches around you?

That kind of pruning takes work, doesn't it! And discernment! Planning on your part, and an honest analysis! But the results, will, bring an amazing yield! And all of God's people said, Amen!

**PASTORAL PRAYER**

We wish to follow you Lord. Yet so often we stumble in our pursuit. We truly want to hear your voice and faithfully answer your Call. We want to be your disciples Lord, those who learn, and grow, and bear much Fruit. So please, Father, breathe on us right now the life-giving breath of your Spirit, so that we may do these things, and Glorify your Name!

Lord, you have blessed us far beyond what we deserve, and you continue to do so even now. You have allowed us to reap where we have not sown. You have brought people into our lives that have helped us mature and grow, in truly amazing ways. And you have given us each other, the Church, the Body of Christ, so that our roots can intertwine, and we can fight off the storms together. So, move us now, in Jesus' Name, to bear much Fruit. Help us to heal ourselves and to heal others in Jesus' Name. Help us to spread peace with the Power of the Holy Spirit, and to love with your Love in all that we say and do. Help us to share the Fruit that you produce through us, and in us, all to your Glory Lord, to bring Light into the dark places in our world.

Father, we lift up this divided world to you, asking that you bathe us in peace. We lift up our leaders, Lord, and those in positions of influence and power, asking for your guidance in their lives, your insight for their minds, and your love filling their hearts. And we lift up your Church, Lord, the people sitting on each side of us, and the ones sitting in front and in back of us. We ask for special Blessings on them Lord, Blessings that they can take and share with those they meet. And we also ask for you to smile upon those we lift up right now. Father, we place before you..... We lift up all these people and all these things in the Name of our Risen Savior, as we pray together now the very prayer that He taught us saying, Our Father...