

“I am the vine, you are the branches.”

A third practice of a servant church and the servants who follow Jesus Christ can be summarized in one word -- Relate. A servant church relates Christian disciples to a new community built on the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Any who have studied the religions of the world know that many religions are individualistic in nature. Some religious traditions encourage adherents to become one with God through meditation, while others encourage individuals to find salvation through the practice of good works. The focus is on the individual. Some Christians view their relationship with God in individualistic terms as well. They say, “Hey, my faith is a personal thing between me and God.” “I don’t need to be part of a congregation.” “I can be a Christian by myself.” “It’s about me and God!” “It’s personal.”

These people are right about one thing. The Christian faith is personal. We believe in a personal God who knows each of us personally. We believe in a personal

God who loves each one of us personally. We believe in a personal God who desires to be in a relationship with each of us personally. But while the Christian faith is personal, it is not private. The Christian faith is about relationships, and about being related to a new community— the church.

Jesus wanted to create a new community. When Jesus described the nature of this new community in John 15, he used the image of the “vine and the branches.” The “grapevine” was a common image in Jesus’ world. Vineyards were everywhere in Palestine, and had been for thousands of years. The people listening to Jesus talk about “the vine” knew how to cultivate and care for a grapevine. When he reminded them that branches that bear no fruit are trimmed away, they knew what he meant. When he reminded them that branches that do bear fruit are pruned to make them more fruitful, they understood what he meant.

Today, we still consume a lot of grapes, but most of us are pretty far

removed from growing process. When I pick up grapes at the grocery store I don't give a lot of thought to how they got there. Those of you who are gardeners, however, may actually have a grapevine or two in your yard. You will know that a grapevine has a central vine or trunk, and branches (or canes) that grow from the trunk, which produce leaves and clusters of fruit. New branches can be grafted onto the vine.

Jesus used the grapevine to describe what it was like to be related to this new community — the church — that was coming into being. In John 15, verse 1, Jesus says, "I am the True Vine, and my Father is the Gardener." Notice that Jesus doesn't say "I am *a* vine." He says, "I am the *True* Vine." This would have gotten his listener's attention, because the grapevine was also a symbol for the nation of Israel. Much like the Bald Eagle is symbol for the United States, the grapevine had long symbolized Israel. It is used throughout the Old Testament to describe Israel — Israel as a grapevine under God's care. On the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem there was a huge grapevine carved into the stone of the entrance. And during a brief period of national independence, the coins that Israel minted bore the grapevine as a symbol.

When Jesus says that he is the True Vine, he is also saying that Israel — isn't. Israel had failed to bear fruit, again and again and again. God had now sent his Son Jesus to be the True Israel, under God's care. "I am the True Vine, and my Father is the

Gardener."

Related to the True Vine

When we talk about what it means to be related to a new community built on the love of God in Jesus Christ, the place we need to start is to make sure that we are related, grafted, or connected to the True Vine. We need to be clear that we are living, abiding, and remaining in the True Vine — because there are a lot of other vines out there!

When we take an honest look in our own backyards, we might find a few "other" vines. These "other" vines may also provide us with a little spiritual insight. One of the vines could be the *Morning Glory*. The Morning Glory is one of the most beautiful, flowering vines. Its flowers come in a variety of eye-catching colors and sizes, and sometimes with giant trumpet-like blooms. The Morning Glory is also an aggressive vine, and a prolific bloomer.

It seems that some people choose to be grafted onto the vine of the *Spiritual Morning Glory*. If we are seeking our own glory, and if our goals in life are the attainment of money, or status, or power, or things, and if we feel driven by selfish ambition to achieve these things at the expense of our families and our faith, then, we had better take a look at which vine to which we are attached. For, you see, these things do not endure. The flower of the Morning Glory only lasts one day, and its vine only lasts one season.

The prophet Isaiah wrote, “The grass withers and the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.”

Jesus said, “I am the True Vine,” but there are other vines out there. One fall we were out raking leaves in the yard, and my daughter, Kate, found a vine that we did not realize was there. We discovered it after she broke out with poison ivy. If you have had a case of poison ivy you know how awful it can be. You innocently brush up against it, and you suffer from it for weeks.

Some people, for many reasons, become grafted onto a *spiritual poison ivy*. If we become a branch on spiritual poison ivy, we have the capacity to spread suffering to anyone we touch, or anyone who touches us. We become negative, critical, vindictive. Perhaps we have been hurt, and we have chosen to be bitter rather than to get better. Or perhaps we have chosen destructive behaviors that hurt ourselves and others.

Jesus said, “I am the True Vine,” but there are other vines out there. Another vine is the Virginia Creeper. If you have a Virginia Creeper in your yard, you know that they can climb up almost anywhere, and just take over. Do you ever feel like your life is being taken over? —taken over by activities that don’t bring any meaning to your life? Do you ever feel like you are going in all different directions at one time — that you have lost focus— that your life is not bearing the kind of fruit that it could? Then perhaps you have become grafted onto a *Spiritual*

Virginia Creeper. It takes over. It goes in all directions. It does not produce fruit.

Jesus said, “I am the true vine.” The place we must begin is to make sure that we are connected to the right vine — the True Vine. Then we have got to remain in the True Vine. Jesus also says, “Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me” (John 15:4).

When a word is repeated over and over in a passage scripture, it’s probably a good indication that we should pay attention to it. The word “remain” or “abide” is used in this passage ten times. It means to “stay in relationship.” Here it is stressing the importance of staying in relationship to Jesus and his word. Jesus is saying, “stay in relationship with me and I will stay in relationship with you. If you do you, will bear much fruit.” Staying in relationship with Christ is a decision that we renew each day, by God’s grace.

Christian Faith is Personal, But Not Private

We have been talking about our relationship to the Vine — to Christ — in individualistic terms: “Is my branch connected to the True Vine?” “Am I staying in relationship with Jesus and his word?” These are important questions, because the Christian faith *is* personal. We believe in a personal God, and a personal Savior, and having a

personal relationship with Christ. But Jesus' teaching about the vine and the branches also reminds us that while the Christian faith is personal, it is *not* private. When we become part of the True Vine, we become part of a community of many branches that have a common purpose: to live in relationship to Jesus and to each other, and to bear the fruit of love. The bearing of fruit is not an individual enterprise. Free-standing branches cannot bear fruit alone. They must be part of the vine. Those of us who follow Christ are connected in the vine and to the other branches. If we stay connected, related to the vine, we bear fruit. If we cut ourselves off from the vine, we wither.

A New Community Built on Love

The new community that Jesus created is built upon loving relationships. When Jesus was asked what was the greatest commandment, he replied, "Love God and love your neighbor" (Matt. 22:37-39). Jesus is saying that the most important thing in life is the quality of our relationships. Authentic life is based upon loving God and loving your neighbor. He further expanded upon this truth when he gave his followers a New Commandment (John 13:34; 15:12). Jesus says, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you... and now, love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:9-12).

A servant church is called to relate followers of Christ to a new

community that is built on love. What is the nature of this love? The Apostle Paul defined it in I Corinthians 13: "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends." (1 Cor. 13:4-8). C. S. Lewis, in *Mere Christianity*, defined it as an "unselfish concern for the good of another." However, the love on which the new community is built is most clearly demonstrated in the self-giving, self-sacrificial love of God in Jesus Christ. The author of 1 John writes: "God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In 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. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another" (1 John 4:9-11).

The Christian faith is deeply personal, but it is not private. When we enter into a relationship with God we also enter into a relationship with God's children — all of those whom Jesus came to seek and save. The church, as its best, is a place where a different kind of community life can be experienced. A place where self-centered love can be transformed into God-centered and neighbor-centered love.

An Experience of Koinonia

After Jesus' death and resurrection, the church — the new community — was born. His first disciples began to seek out new disciples, and to educate them in the teaching of Christ, and to relate them to this new community. The book of Acts gives us a picture of this new community: "So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved" (Acts 2:41-47).

A key word in this passage is the Greek word *koinonia*, translated here as "fellowship." *Koinonia* can also be translated as "association," "communion," "close relationship," "generosity," "participation," and "sharing." These are words that describe the new community when it is at its best. How have you experienced *koinonia* in the local

church?

What Does the New Community Look Like?

One of the best ways to explain the new community of the church is to look at the "one another" passages of the New Testament. Look up a few:

John 13:34-35

Hebrews 3:13

Romans 12:10

Romans 14:19

1 Thess. 5:15

Romans 15:7

Galatians 5:13

1 Cor. 12:25

Eph. 4:32

James 5:16

Romans 14:13

The Body of Christ

Another image used by the Apostle Paul to describe the new community of the church was the human body. The church is the *body* of Christ.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-27.

What does this passage teach us about the nature of the new community?