

# North Kildonan United Church

2<sup>nd</sup> May 2021 ~Rev. Don Johnson

## “Christ the True Vine”

*Acts 8: 26-40*

*I John 4: 7-21*

*John 15: 1-8*

*Grant, O God, that in the written word and through the spoken word, we may behold the living Word, our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Jesus said: *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower."*

Seven times in the Gospel of John, Jesus begins an important teaching to the disciples by saying I am.

*I am the bread of life.* Whoever comes to me will never be hungry...

*I am the light of the world.* Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life...

*I am the gate for the sheep.* Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture...

*I am the good shepherd.* The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep...

*I am the resurrection and the life.* Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die...

*I am the way, and the truth, and the life.* No one comes to the Father except through me...

*I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower.* I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing...

So why does John have Jesus begin each time with *I am*? Think back to Exodus, to the story of Moses and the liberation of the people of Israel. Moses had asked God to tell him God's name. In chapter 3 we read: *"But Moses said to God, 'If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you', and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them? God said to Moses, I AM WHO I AM. Thus you are to say to the Israelites, I AM has sent me to you."* (Exodus 3:11-14)

I AM WHO I AM. Thus Israel believed and believes that God always was, always is and always will be. By using "I am", Jesus is identifying himself as God, and bearing God's presence on Earth. His life, his teachings, his compassion and forgiveness, his death and resurrection, all are God's way of reaching out to God's creation.

Jesus said: *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing"*.

So why is Jesus the true vine? In his commentary on John, Tom Wright says: *"Within Jewish tradition, the vine was the picture of Israel. God brought a vine out of Egypt and planted it in the promised land. (another Exodus reference). It had been ravaged by wild animals and needed protecting and re-establishing. The vineyard of Israel, said Isaiah in chapter 5, has borne wild grapes instead of proper ones. Other prophets used the same picture."*

Tom Wright continues: *"Now Jesus is saying that he is the true vine. This can only mean that he is, himself, the true Israel. He is the one on whom God's purposes are now resting. And his followers are members of God's true people-if they belong to him and remain in him."*

So in today's gospel, the seventh and last of the I am sayings, Jesus metaphorically talks of the community of faith he is gathering around him as a vineyard, with Jesus as the true vine, God is the grower and we are the branches. Besides the picture of Israel as the vine and Jesus saying he is the true vine, the reality of keeping a vineyard would be easily understood by those first disciples. They would know the need to prune and trim, to encourage growth here and cut back on growth there. They would know that careful cultivating, feeding and trimming, would produce the best grapes for winemaking. They would also know that if you just let the vines and branches grow wherever, without wise pruning, the energy of the plant would be dispersed everywhere instead of being focused on growing prime quality grapes. Without care, the resulting horticultural chaos would cause the vine to produce second rate grapes and unpruned leaves and branches would become a tangled mess that would block sunlight and weaken the plant. To prune the vine, just as to prune roses and other plants, is to allow it to come to full life, to allow its leaves full access to the sun and frees up the sending of full energy to the remaining branches.

But more importantly, as they thought of what a strong and healthy vineyard was like, they would see the connections they had with the one who is the true vine, the one who brought such joy and love and meaning to their own lives. They would see their connection to Christ the same way as the branches draw life from the vine.

Jesus encourages his followers to draw close to him, to abide in him and allow him to abide in them. Eugene Peterson, in his translation The Message puts it this way: *"Live in me, Make your home in me just as I do in you."* As followers of Christ we trust that he is our true vine, the one who loves and cares for us, the one who feeds us with his very body and blood.

By and large, the Christian faith is a communal faith. From the very beginnings Christian people have gathered together to worship, to hear the word of God read and preached, to sing the songs of faith, to pray for others and for the world around us, to enjoy the fellowship and companionship of sisters and brothers in the community.

Being sociable, practicing hospitality, shaking hands and offering hugs, all this and more has been so suppressed during these months of pandemic. In a real sense, we as a congregation have been brutally pruned by the need to reduce the power of this virus. We are not alone in this; all faith communities have been required to drastically change their age-old patterns. Nothing nowadays can be taken for granted. Well almost nothing.

Jesus said that he was the true vine and that we are the branches. He has not failed us, nor has he forsaken us. Christ is as close as a word of prayer, a passage of scripture, a friendly phone call, an online worship service.

Yes, through isolation and limitation and fear we are being pruned and it is at times terribly painful. But we can hope that once we are on the other side of this pandemic, we might have a stronger appreciation of what it means to freely gather for worship, to sing our hymns and be together, to celebrate the fullness of the great gift which is being a part of North Kildonan United Church. Coffee after church will never taste so good as it will on that first Sunday back.

With the love of Christ within us, with the strength of the Holy Spirit to comfort us, with the companionship of our fellow Christians beside us, we will carry on, filled with the hope our faith gives us.

And we will trust in Christ's word. *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing..."*

Let us continue to bear what fruit we can, as we live towards a brighter future. Amen.