

Jesus said to his disciples, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. 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. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”

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Growing grapes for good wine involves a great deal of skillful craft, more than a little art and a touch of mystery. If you have ever visited a vineyard that uses old world techniques to coax the best out of their grapes, then you have seen the thick gnarled, twisted old growth at the base of each vine. Their rugged endurance is often more admirable than their beauty.

You probably also noticed that the vine-grower, the vintner, had trained those woody old vines up poles and intertwined them with other vines to form a horizontal row. Like a healthy church community, each row creates a stable platform that supports new growth called the “cluster zone.”

In early spring, the first buds emerge from the old wood. And if they survive late frosts, buds give rise to canes that leaf out. And then within a few weeks, they produce clusters of fruit like those on the front of your bulletin.

During the summer, the vintner watches and tests and tastes the fruit to make decisions about pruning leaves and shoots. The intent is to give the grapes a proper mix of sun and shade, suitable air circulation and an appropriate balance between plant growth and fruit maturity.

Some kinds of stress actually cause the vines to focus on producing higher-quality grapes, but the vintner will cut away any canes that don't set *any* fruit so that they don't sap life from the plant. Then, when the vines go dormant in the winter, the vintner prunes everything

back to a few bumps on the intertwined row where next year's buds will develop.

It's a combination of art and craft. First century Mediterraneans would have recognized that pattern when Jesus said, "I am the true vine," to his followers, "and my Father is the vintner. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away; and every branch that bears fruit he trims clean so that it might bear more fruit."

Now, as I mentioned, there is also touch of mystery involved in raising wine grapes. At the risk of starting arguments with my Italian friends, there is a centuries-old concept in French wine-making called "terroir." The word doesn't translate into English, although it is related to "territory."

The notion refers to the spectrum of noticeable flavors and fragrances created by the unique makeup of the soil and the bedrock where the vines grow. One grape variety famous for drawing its characteristic taste and aroma from its terroir is pinot noir. And some of the best wine made from those grapes is grown in Oregon's Willamette Valley. We'll share some at our Eucharistic table this morning.

Now, you might think that the best soil for grapevines would be the rich, fertile mix of clay, sand and compost that we buy for our gardens. That kind of soil is too rich in nutrients for grape vines. Grapevines do much better in stony ground. And the bedrock beneath the stony soil in the Willamette Valley is not fresh new earth but 52-million-year-old lava fields and ancient marine sediment.

And the nature of that ancient bedrock and soil is communicated through the character of the wine. The mystery is that scientists still can't say exactly how that happens.

So, when Jesus compares God to a vintner and the church to a vineyard, he is not describing who is in and who is out. When he pleads, "Abide in me," it's not to intimidate people into staying loyal and faithful. Jesus is conjuring images of people in relationships interwoven with each other and in utter dependence on God.

Jesus is making a promise to be with us – you and me – for all time, just like the gnarled woody stock, the true vine that remains after all the pruning. No matter what else happens to us here in the cluster zone, Jesus will remain with us, supporting us, nourishing us and enduring in us.

The time and place of our lives are influential in shaping us so that we are quite different than some people and very much like others. And the Risen Christ, the true vine that forms our roots, communicates the nature of the timeless bedrock of creation through us in all our humanness, just as we are.

Let me give you just a taste.

In 1975, Annie Dillard moved into a one-room cabin in the woods of Lummi Island right here in Puget Sound. For the next 14 months, she wrote and contemplated and edited and rewrote and edited some more. She finally produced a breathtaking 66-page lyrical poem called *Holy the Firm*.

Here's what she wrote about a vision she had of Christ emerging from the waters of baptism:

“[Christ] lifts from the water. Water beads on his shoulders. I see the water in balls as heavy as planets, a billion beads of water as weighty as worlds, and he lifts them up on his back as he rises. He stands wet in the water. Each one bead is transparent, and each has a world, or the same world, light and alive and apparent inside the drop: it is all there ever could be, moving at once, past and future, and all the people. I can look into any sphere and see people stream past me, and cool my eyes with colors and the sight of the world in spectacle perishing ever, and ever renewed.”

Dillard's poetic imagery provides a witness to human participation in the world as it is continually being created in all its wild and hopeful fertility. She points to the sacramental potential for each and every interdependent human self to be made whole, to be made holy, and recognized as distinguishable parts of one being.

What astonishes Dillard, an Episcopalian, is that a church community can cultivate this vision through the liturgy in the sacraments of baptism and communion.

The Divine interaction with creation that Dillard wrote about is always present, whether we are aware of it or not. And the Risen Christ, our brother, is Awareness Itself, the true vine. The Greek word for “true” has less to do with factual right and wrong; it means quite literally a lack of forgetfulness.

Christ, as the True Vine, is the one who remembers, who is awake always and for all time; Christ is the one who is fully aware of the

communion between all creation and the bedrock source of all creation. In the context of the Last Supper, John's Jesus invited people into his own awareness of the ever-present flow of the Divine life and love: "Abide in me," the Risen Christ still says, "as I abide in you."

Waking up to God's larger reality *as it actually is* changes our ordinary reality. Realizing that, we gather at this table as those who hope and strive to stay in communion with the True Vine. We walk to the altar together, we open our hearts and minds, our hands and our mouths. We drink into our physical bodies the nature of Christ, whose total awareness emerges and merges with our own God-given and still developing consciousness.

We receive the mystery of Christ-consciousness in bread and wine made from the fruit of the earth that God created. This profoundly embodied and sensual action anchors our spirituality in creation, purifies our yearning, lights our way and directs our actions even as they are colored by our unique constellation of life experiences, times and choices.

We bring ourselves – our bodies, our minds, our souls – just as we bring the fruits of God's earth that we have changed into bread and wine. God sanctifies them all, nourishes us and renews us. Our good works, our fruitfulness, you see, do not create or merit the indwelling of Christ's life in us.

Quite the reverse.

The fruitfulness of our life and faith flow through us as expressions of God's life and grace, and we are given to creation as vessels of God's abundance.

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