

I think just about everyone has seen a grape vine at some point in their lives. We all know what they look like. Long rows of trellises with vines stretched out on them. A wall of big, green leaves with heavy purple clusters of fruit hanging underneath them. It's a well-known image.

But did you know it's not the only way to grow grapes. I found that out years ago when I had an opportunity to visit the island of Crete in the Mediterranean. We were driving on a bus through the countryside and our tour guide was talking about all the wine made on Crete. And she made it sound like the garden of Eden. Yet, as we looked out the windows, all we saw was mile after mile of dusty brown hills dotted by what looked like small green shrubs.

We asked her about this and she told us to look closer at those shrubs. Those were, in fact, the grape vines. They didn't grow stretched out on long trellises. They grew in compact, tightly wound bowls, trained into that shape by pruning and tying, with the leaves on the outside and the grapes on the inside. And the roots stretching deep into the soil underneath.

And she explained that while this technique isn't quite as productive as using a trellis, it's a much better way to grow grapes in a hot, dry climate, like Crete has. Because those deep roots mean you don't need to use nearly as much water to keep the plants alive. They can tap directly into the ground water.

It's an ingenious solution to the problem. And though modern irrigation techniques have made the practice obsolete in most areas of the world, on Crete it's still practiced. Just like it was for hundreds of years throughout the ancient world. Just like it probably was in Jesus' day in Judea.

And what's really interesting about these vines is their age. Because when a vine survives by having these incredibly deep roots, it can take a decade for a single plant to even get started. Year after year simply waiting for it to finally tap into enough ground water that it can start producing grapes. Which means that the core of the vine, the heart and soul of it, is not the branches on the top. You can chop those off all the way to the ground and have them grown back in a couple of years.

No, the vine itself is that trunk sticking out of the ground. Diving deep down into the soil. Tapping into water the branches on the top could never possibly reach. And that vine, that core trunk from which all the branches grow, it lasts for years. Generations. The vines in a vineyard might be passed down from father to son to grandson. All of them pruning these branches back hundred of times in their lifetimes.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus talks about a vineyard like this. And I think it's useful to understand the analogy He's making here. Because it's pretty obvious that He and His Father have very little patience with unproductive branches in His vineyard. *“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that does not bear fruit he takes away.”*

Why shouldn't He, really? I mean, it makes no sense to keep around branches that bear no fruit. There is one very old, very important vine here. A vine perfectly capable of producing huge quantities of good fruit. And this branch is doing nothing? It's just sitting there, leaching off precious water? Using up valuable nutrients from the soil?

No. You don't keep that branch around. Maybe it's diseased. Maybe it's damaged. Maybe it's defective. Whatever it is, you cut your losses. You chop it off. You start fresh. And you wait a little bit for a new branch to grow. One that will probably bear lots of fruit. Because that's what the branches of a good vine do.

And a lot of people think that when Jesus uses this analogy, he's kinda hanging a knife over our heads. “You better produce fruit or I'm gonna chop you off.” Oh, we like to couch it in lovely euphemisms about Jesus “encouraging” us or “exhorting” us or whatever. But let's be real here. If you think that's what Jesus is saying, then it's a threat. Pure and simple.

And to be fair, there is a warning here. He tells us flat out, *“Apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.”* Yeah, that's not a pleasant thought. It's not supposed to be.

But it's not talking about us. At least, it's not talking about me. And if you're here this morning, it's probably not talking about you. Because those branches thrown into the fire? They were separated from the vine altogether. They did not remain in Christ. He did not remain in them. The two parted ways long ago and had nothing to do with each other.

There are Christians who reach that point. Who separate themselves from Christ. From His gifts of Word and Sacrament. But that separation is about more than just whether or not you bore fruit. No, when Jesus talks about being cut off because you didn't bear fruit, he's not talking about his disciples. In fact, He says rather boldly. *“If a man remains in me and I in him, he WILL bear much fruit.”* No questions about it. It's not up to you.

The fruit that Jesus is talking about – the fruit of faith and righteousness and the Gospel – that is fruit we will produce. And we will produce exactly what he wants. Because it's not your fruit. He is the vine. It's Christ's fruit, grown through you. But only once we are His branch.

Which I really think is what He was getting at with those first words about cutting off branches that don't bear fruit. We were born in sin. We were born separated from Him. We were born branches who wanted to have nothing to do with our vine, as absurd as that sounds.

We were more like parasites than branches, because a healthy branch always produces fruit. But we were diseased and damaged and defective. We didn't bear fruit. Not the fruit of faith or righteousness or the Gospel. Not even the fruit of life. We were spiritually dead and withered. So we were cut off. And that sinfulness in us was thrown into the fire.

And yet, we weren't simply abandoned to the flames. Because, by the grace of God we were born again. Born again of water and the Word. Born again in the waters of Baptism, like that Ethiopian in our other reading.

Born a new branch of the same vine. A branch firmly attached to the vine that is Christ Jesus, because it was by his blood shed on the cross that we were born anew. A branch without disease or damage or defect, for it was by the sin and pain he bore on the cross that we are clothed with righteousness and holiness and life. A branch that can bear much fruit and does bear much fruit, because we ourselves are the fruit of his work in us.

Which is really where we need to see ourselves and see our lives. Yes, Jesus is giving us a warning here. Absolutely. Those who separate themselves from him will find only death. That's a warning. That's a threat. And we need to heed it. If not for ourselves, then for all those we love who say they know Jesus, and yet in no way remain in Him. In His Word. In His Sacraments. In His Church. In any part of Him.

But more importantly, this is a message of hope. You are a branch of a vine with deep, deep roots. You draw every ounce of living water and daily bread from that vine. He is your way. Your truth. Your life. And because you belong to Him, because you remain in Him, you do bear fruit. Every day, you are bearing fruit for Him. And every day you show yourself to be His disciple.

So look for that fruit. Not to say, “Oh, look at all I've done.” But to say, “Look at all that God has done for me. In me. Through me.” Rejoice that He has made you clean. Take comfort even in those painful times that He prunes you little by little. Draw strength from the faithfulness He has shown to you.

For you are more than a fruitless vine fighting against a God you refused to know. More than a dead branch tossed into the fire. You bear the fruit of the resurrected Christ. You bear the fruit of new life. New life in our resurrected Lord. And new life in the resurrection he has promised you. Amen.