PLAY VIDEO

A few years ago, in early Spring, I was weeding along our fence line in the backyard, and noticed that old dead grape vines were wrapped around the posts and dead-looking vines weaved themselves through the holes in the chain link fence. I began to pull out the old dead vines, clipping them way back into the ground. The grapevines had not been pruned back for years, and the truth is, I wasn’t really pruning the vines, I was attempting to pull them out.

A couple months later, I noticed green shoots were beginning to show up on the brown vines, on what I thought were dead grapevines, so out of curiosity I began to water the grapes. Through the next four months I watched the leaves become bigger and quite green, with small little buds starting to sprout on the limbs. By September this small, dead-looking grapevine began to produce beautiful purple grapes. I was shocked by the abundance of the crop, when the only care I gave the vine was a little water. Mark and I ate as many grapes as possible, and then I finally gave 4 large sacks of fruit away.

I recalled the words of Kay Ashmore during the video when she mentioned the idea that God’s presence with us is everlasting. Even when we want nothing to do with Jesus, the Spirit of God prevails, needing only a little water and attention for our spiritual lives to start producing fruit. Her observation provoked a question, “Why did Jesus use this metaphor of the grapevines with the disciples at this time?” Let me give some context to this story shared by John in chapter 15.

Jesus is offering these words to his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion. He knows what is going to happen – both to himself and to his flock – yet they do not know what is about to happen. They are about to be cut down by his crucifixion and death and he is assuring them that it will not be mere, senseless cutting, but that they will survive, even flourish. The second context is that of the community for which John writes. By the time the disciples hear these words they have already been scattered, likely thrown out of their synagogue, and have had plenty of reason to feel like they’ve been abandoned. But John writes to assure them that while they have indeed been cut or pruned, the pruning is for more abundant life to appear in their lives, and in the world.

No doubt that was hard to believe for these first disciples of Jesus, as there was precious little evidence available to the disciples or John’s community that they had not been completely abandoned. And perhaps as Christians ourselves, we too, struggle finding hope for a more fruitful future. But amid this uncertainty and distress, Jesus still invites us – actually, not just invites but promises us – that he will not abandon us but rather will cling to us like a vine clings to a fence line, so that we endure, persevere, and even flourish among these present difficulties. Within certain branches of Christianity, it may look like the vine is no longer producing fruit, but if I believe these words of Jesus in John 15, by Jesus abiding in us, and we abiding in Jesus, fruit will manifest itself, in spite, of our efforts to make change happen.

Here’s the thing: if Jesus had only said, “abide in me or else,” that would be a different matter. But Jesus said much more. “Abide in me,” Jesus says, “as I abide in you.” This is more than good advice. More than an invitation. This is a promise, that no matter what happens, Jesus will be with you and with me. That no matter what happens, Jesus will hold onto us. And that no matter what happens, God in Jesus continues to work in and through us.

Jesus is demonstrating the power found in mutual relationship. The image of the vine offers a picture by which the disciples may see themselves as never being disconnected from the vine, even if they choose not to spend time with Jesus. The Old Testament tells mankind that man is made in the image of God and that God’s image will not die in us if we continue to dwell in the presence of Jesus. Our spiritual lives can look a bit withered at times, but give ourselves a little water, and green sprouts may begin to show themselves.

John 15 tells us that relying on God is what counts in our lives, because life is nothing without belonging, without intimacy, without relationship. We have felt the lack of mutual relationship this past year during the pandemic, yet we continue to cope. The separation has not been easy, and feeling connected to one another is much harder to maintain through Zoom, but we are still connected to the vine grower and to each other.

Kay Ashmore told us that the vine represented a promise that God is with her, even when she doesn’t claim God’s presence. Even when we cannot meet in person, God is still present. Even when pews are left empty, and we wring our hands saying that the presence of Christianity may die, Jesus said the vine would not die.

If I lean into the promise found in John 15 that was left to a small community of believers who saw no hope for the message of Jesus to thrive, then who am I to say that Christianity is dying, but could in fact be changing beneath the very ground we stand on. Perhaps, the vines of Christianity look dead, but look at the pruning that is taking place. Practicing Christianity is changing before our very eyes, just as practicing our worship of Jesus changed this past year through Zoom and livestreaming.

Let’s allow ourselves to look for the small buds of growth now being groomed inside the lives of each other. Reread the conversation between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in our Acts reading today. Philip was a dynamic Christian for the early church, yet he didn’t even ask the Ethiopian to be baptized, it was the eunuch who pointed to the water and said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” We like to think we need to ask people to follow Jesus or be baptized, but we may have the process backwards in the 21st Century. Maybe, we just need to be authentic with how we live our lives for Jesus, and the fruit will present itself, just like it did in the life of Philip, and in the life of the disciples. Our job is to stay connected to the vine grower, and spiritual fruit, John says, will naturally be produced. Amen.