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Among the first things you see when you walk into the sanctuary of BBC are the four large wooden carvings over the organ speaker screens on the front wall. These beautiful pieces were drawn, cut, stained, and finished by folks at BBC. When we began the process of deciding what we wanted to do, we wanted to have Christian images that also reflected our Cape Cod setting. So we settled on a ship, an anchor, a scallop shell, and fish. Our Christian fish looks very much like a striped bass that is definitely big enough to be a keeper.

Around all these symbols there is a core image that comes from John 15. There is a vine with branches and fruit. This image comes from the final I am saying we will look at in John's Gospel. Listen to John 15:1-11.

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. 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^b 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.** 6 Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much **fruit** and become my disciples. 9 As the Father has **loved** me, so I have **loved** you; abide in my **love**. 10 **If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love**, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his **love**. 11 I have said these things to you **so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.**"

Many people enjoying gardening, clearly so does God who created the whole earth. God knows every tree and flower and all about nurturing and cultivating anything that grows out of the ground. I still don't understand why God allowed things like poison ivy and winter moths, but part of life is going forward and doing our best even though we don't understand everything.

a The same Greek root refers to pruning and cleansing

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The first verse of John 15 tells us something of the relationship of Jesus and the Father. Jesus is the vine, his father is the vinegrower. The imagery conveys there is a difference between them – they are not the same, but also acknowledges their unity. Jesus' words come with a sharp edge – he says his Father, the gardener, "Removes every branch in me that bears no **fruit**.

*Every branch that bears **fruit** he prunes to make it bear more **fruit**."*

The image of God coming to the vine with a sharp crooked blade and starting to hack at the branches is a little disturbing, isn't it? Especially since Jesus says that every unfruitful branch in him will be cut off. A significant element of the vine imagery is the threat of divine judgment. The assumption is that fruitless branches are already separated from the love that the vine provides, since they do not bear the fruit of love. The fruit bearing of disciples of Jesus springs from abiding or living in union with Jesus through loving obedience which leads to joy. Jesus says every branch that bears no fruit withers, is cut off, and burned. Every branch that that bears fruit is pruned to make it bear more fruit.

Even though Jesus says that each type of branch is going to experience the knife of God, we often are not happy at the prospect of it being applied to us!

Urban T. Holmes III wrote in *Spirituality for Ministry*, "*Any good gardener knows that beautiful roses require careful pruning. Pieces of a living plant have to die. It cannot just grow wild. We cannot simply "celebrate growth." It is more than to be regretted, it is tragic that we seem to have lost the insight that **growth in Christ requires careful pruning**. Pieces of us by our intentional action need to die if we are to become the person that is in God's vision. We are not cutting away a cancerous growth, but making room for intended growth.*"

The reality behind the symbolism of the vine and the branches in John 15 is intimate friendship. Leslie Weatherhead wrote in, *The Transforming Friendship*, (page 18): "**Christianity is the acceptance of the gift of the friendship of Jesus.**" The gift of friendship can be life changing. At the Brewster Ladies Library you can learn about Helen Keller spending time in Brewster. For those who don't know the story of Helen Keller, when she was a 6-year-old girl, her parents, on the advice of Dr. Alexander Graham Bell, sent for a teacher from the Perkins Institution for the Blind in Massachusetts. Anne Sullivan, a 19-year-old orphan, was chosen for the task of instructing Helen. It was the beginning of a close and lifelong friendship between them. By means of a manual alphabet, Anne "spelled" into Helen's hand words like *doll* or

puppy. Two years later Helen was reading and writing Braille fluently. At 10 Helen learned different sounds by placing her fingers on her teacher's larynx and "hearing" the vibrations. Later Helen went to Radcliffe College, where Anne spelled lectures into Helen's hand! After graduating with honors, Helen decided to devote her life to helping the blind and deaf. As part of that endeavor, she wrote many books and articles and traveled around the world making speeches. Since Helen's speeches were not intelligible to some, Anne often translated them for her. Their nearly 50 years of companionship ended when Anne died in 1936. Helen wrote these endearing words about her lifelong friend:

My teacher is so near to me that I scarcely think of myself apart from her.

I feel that her being is inseparable from my own, and that the footsteps of my life are in hers. All the best of me belongs to her – there is not a talent or an inspiration or a joy in me that has not been awakened by her loving touch.¹

In many ways, what teacher and friend Anne Sullivan was to Helen Keller, Jesus is to those who follow him. Jesus said in Matthew 10:24-25, "*A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to become like the teacher, and the slave like the master.*" If the gift of human friendship can be life changing, how much more so friendship with Jesus as we become like our teacher.

In all friendships, we take seriously what our friend takes seriously which in John 15 means the commandments of Jesus, especially the command to love. As we abide or remain in Jesus, as we live in him and draw our life from him, we will bear the fruit of love that God is seeking in us. Brother Lawrence wrote in *The Practice of the Presence of God*, about what it looks like to live in the presence of Christ at all times. "*The most holy practice, the nearest to daily life, and the most essential for the spiritual life, is **the practice of the presence of God**, that is to find joy in his divine company and to make it a habit of life, speaking humbly and conversing lovingly with him at all times, every moment, without rule or restriction, above all at times of temptation, distress, dryness, and revulsion, and even of faithlessness and sin.*" Practicing the presence of God is living as close to the Lord as a branch does to its vine and we can do that wherever we are and whatever we're doing throughout the day.

Henri Nouwen said, "*I know that I have to move from speaking about Jesus to letting him speak within me, from thinking about Jesus to letting him think within me, from acting for and with Jesus to letting him act through me.*

¹ Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life* (Doubleday, 1954).

*I know the only way for me to see the world is to see it through his eyes.*²

In order for Jesus to speak and think within us, and to act through us, there will be things in our life that will need to change or be pruned. Ajith Fernando observed in *The Christian's Attitude Toward World Religions*, "One who trusts in Christ alone will completely give up his idols, horoscopes, and other such practices of his old life that go against Christ's Lordship. When a true believer is made aware of any area of his life that is not yielded to Christ, he will yield it. When he is made aware of a Christian principle to be followed, he will follow it whatever the cost. So when a new believer finds out that a follower of Christ should love his enemies, he will do so, even though that seems sheer folly in today's society. When he finds out that a follower of Christ cannot pay a bribe, he will stop paying bribes and pay dearly for it as far as his success in society is concerned. When he finds out that a follower of Christ treats both high and low caste people, both rich and poor people as equals, he will do so, however hard that may be for him."

One should not read John 15 without hearing the invitation to be an intimate friend of Jesus and without being confronted by the fact that God has expectations for all of us that we will be fruitful if we are receiving the benefits of being "in" the vine and that there are consequences if we are not. We have new members joining the church today. Some are experienced Christians and others are new or younger believers. Those new members should be able to approach those of us who have been following Jesus for years and ask us about how God has transformed us. We should be able to tell others how we have been changed by Jesus. If we are the same angry, cranky, gossiping, unforgiving, bitter, selfish, or greedy person we were when we first became a Christian – something is terribly wrong. If we are friends with Jesus, that friendship impacts us.

Leslie Weatherhead wrote in *The Transforming Friendship*, about the transformation that takes place in the lives of those who become friends of Jesus. "In all who come near Jesus manners soften, hearts become gentle. There is new tenderness, a new sympathy, a new joy, a kind of infectious goodness. The disciples begin to say things, do things, be things, which they never could have said or done or been before. But those friends who have watched the change know the secret. They have been with Jesus. The friendship has done it. Friendship will always do that for us. It will make us like the friend we admire and see much of."

Jesus says, "I have said these things to you **so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.**" "Jesus was and is a joyous, creative person. One of

² Henry J. Nouwen in *Jesus and Mary: Finding Our Sacred Center*.

the most outstanding features of Jesus' personality was precisely an abundance of joy. This he left as an inheritance to his students, 'that their joy might be full' (John 15:11).³ I believe we can experience the joy of Jesus. Happiness is fleeting and dependent upon our circumstances. The joy of Jesus is deeper and dependent on our relationship with him. We have the joy of Jesus by doing what he says – abiding in him, obeying him, loving him, serving him, enjoying the gift of our friendship with him.

All the “I am” sayings of Jesus in John’s Gospel are about a gift that God offers to the world. When Jesus says, “**I Am the bread of life**” (6:35), he is saying he is “the bread of God...which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world,” through his death on the cross for a world that hungers (6:33, 51).

When he says, “**I Am the light of the world**” he tells us he came to give “the light of life” to all who experience the darkness of sin and death, and he demonstrates this gift by bringing light to the eyes of a man born blind (8:12; 9:5-7).

When Jesus says, “**I Am the gate**,” he explains that he came to open a way so that people might be saved through him and have abundant life.

When Jesus says, “**I Am the Good Shepherd**,” he promises to give eternal life to his sheep by laying down his life for them (10:11, 28).

When Jesus says, “**I Am the resurrection and the life**” he emphasizes what he provides to all who believe which gives us hope.

When he says, “**I Am the way, the truth, and the life**” he describes a gift that is extended to all people whom sin has separated from God.

When Jesus says, “**I Am the vine**,” he invites people to abide in him because he will sustain us with divine love (15:1, 4, 9).

John tells us the story of Jesus who is all these things and does all these things for us as a free gift so that we will come to faith in God.

Who wouldn’t want to believe in a God like that?

Who wouldn’t want to follow Jesus who gives so much, even his life, for us.

Prayer

Jesus we thank you for being the bread that satisfies our deepest hunger, the light who illuminates our path, the gate through which we enter eternal life, the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.

³ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, (Harper, San Francisco, 1998), page 64.

We thank you, Jesus, for being the resurrection and the life who conquers even death and for being the way, the truth, and the life who we can follow, trust, and rely on in this world and the next.

Vine Jesus, help us, your branches to remain in you, to abide in your love, and to bear much fruit so that God may be glorified.

And as we do so, please fill us with your joy, that we may share your joy with others. In Your name we pray, Amen.