

## “I Am The True Vine”

Text: John 15:1-11  
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Last August I woke up one day and decided that was the day I was going to get in shape. A few days earlier I was playing in the backyard with my children and after running around for a few minutes, I realized that I was out of breath. It was pathetic! I was hunched over as if I had just run a marathon! I had always thought it would be fun to jog so that is what I decided to do to get in shape. Since I am such a bright, intelligent person, I began jogging in the afternoon in the middle of August. It was only 150 degrees so why not? I figured I would either get in shape really quick or pass out. Thankfully, it was not the latter.

I had made up my mind – I would start jogging and when I could jog no further I would stop. The first day I made it to the end of the street. The next day I jogged a little further and the day after that a little further. Amazingly, I stuck with it. In the past when I began an exercise program I would quit after a week or so, but for some reason I have stuck with jogging. Today I run three miles 4 to 5 times a week. Granted, I am by no means a world class athlete, but at least I can now play with my kids without having to call timeout!

Last week I decided to run in the fourth of July 5k race here in Mexia. Besides track in high school I had never run in a race of any kind, so this was a new experience for me. I had a great time and really enjoyed visiting with the other participants before and after the race. One of my friends from Dawson had entered the race and was there that day. Mike has been running for several years so I thought it would be a good idea to run beside him for as long as I could. As things turned out that wasn't such a bad idea. I stuck by Mike the whole race and as a result ran the three miles five minutes faster than normal. That's another way of saying, "If I had been by myself I would have taken my sweet time to get to the finish line." I needed someone to run beside.

This is the last of our series on the I Am sayings of Jesus in the gospel of John. We have talked about Jesus being the bread of the life, the light of the world, the good shepherd, and now today the true vine. Jesus was a master at making connections between the ordinary, everyday things of life and the spiritual aspects of life. In this case he said, "I am the true vine."

The vine was grown all over Israel. It is a plant which needs a lot of attention. The ground has to be perfectly clean in order for it to grow properly. Wherever it grows careful preparation of the soil is necessary. We cannot just decide one day to go in the backyard and start a vineyard. There is more to it than that. A young vine is not allowed to fruit for the first three years and each year it is cut back to develop and conserve life and energy. When the vine matures, it is pruned in December and January. Each vine bears two kinds of branches, one that bears fruit and another that does not.

Jesus said, "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." In other words, if we want to bear fruit we need to be connected to the right vine – the vine that produces the fruit that God expects of us. Just as I ran the race next to someone who had half a clue how to run so too do we need run the race of life attached to the vine of Jesus.

On Wednesday evening we had a “town hall” meeting at the church. Town hall means “we don’t know what to call this meeting so let’s call it a town hall meeting.” The purpose of the meeting was to discuss in an informal setting the future of our church. We had an outstanding turnout and shared many different ideas about what we believe God is calling us to do as a church. I was very encouraged by the “feeling” among the group. It was a positive meeting in which everyone participated. At the beginning of the meeting I asked the group, “Can someone tell me the mission statement of FUMC Mexia?” Not one person could do it. Even though it’s printed in our bulletin every week, no one at the meeting could remember it. Needless to say, we decided we might need another mission statement! Let me suggest this one: The mission of FUMC Mexia is to make and grow disciples of Jesus Christ and bear fruit for the kingdom of God. In other words, everything we do as a church revolves around that one statement. We are called to do a lot of different things as a church, but our main task is to share the good news of salvation in Jesus and bear fruit for the kingdom.

How we do that as a church is up to you. There are many different ways to attract people and communicate the gospel, but one thing is for sure, we must be connected as a community and as individuals to the true vine. It is God who gives the growth and vitality to the church. We are branches connected to the main vine of Jesus.

The problem, however, is that when the branches are not connected to the lifeline they wither away and become useless. Jesus said, “Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.” In other words, without God our lives are meaningless and ultimately useless. We can fill our days with lots of stuff and activities, but at the end of the day if we don’t know who to thank for life itself then what’s the point? Jesus said that we are to abide in him. That means that we don’t have to live this life on our own, and that everything is not up to us.

In seminary everyone is required to take Homiletics. Homiletics is the fancy word for preaching. As a part of the class we were required to preach three different sermons during the semester in front of the class and the professor. We would preach the sermon and then the class would evaluate us. Needless to say, getting immediate feedback on your sermon can cause quite a bit of anxiety. I like what our professor said one day – “If you think it is tough getting evaluated by your peers and me in a classroom, try going to a church and getting evaluated in the parking lot week after week. You better have something to say and it better be good every week.” He was right.

One day one of the students in our class preached a sermon about discipleship and what it means to be a follower Jesus. Here is what one of the other students had to say after the sermon: “Except for what you said and how you said it, I thought it was a really good sermon.” Needless to say, there was quite a bit of tension in the room after that statement but it was true. It was a terrible sermon. The whole idea of the sermon was that we need to strive to be *just like* Jesus. Sounds good on the surface but think about it for a second, “Is it possible for us to be *just like* Jesus?” I don’t know about you but chances are I’m not going to be found walking on water at Lake Mexia this week. I would also bet that you are not going to feed the entire city with two tacos from Taco Bell. I’m sorry, but some things are reserved specifically for God.

Now this does not imply that we do not strive to do what God has called us to do. We can and should do all in our power to love as God has loved us, but when we begin to think that we are so good that we can handle it on our own, that's when we get in trouble. There is a very good reason that God is God and you and I are not. Just because it's impossible for us to be just like Jesus, it's not impossible for God to do great things through us. Even though we will never be on the same level as Jesus, God can and will work miracles through those who trust and believe in his promises. Jesus said, "Apart from me you can do nothing." That is the honest truth. Without that connection we are powerless, but with the connection we can, as Paul said, "Do all things through him who strengthens us."

I found it interesting that Jesus said the branches that are attached to him bear much fruit. They not only bear fruit, but much fruit. The branches are pruned back and produce over and over again. We serve a God of abundance. I don't know about you but the God I believe in is not limited to our little minds and little boxes that we very often attempt to squeeze him into. Our God thinks big and is big. Let me warn you – if you get connected to the vine of Jesus get ready for some amazing things to happen. Get ready to be blessed and to be a blessing.

One of the first of Jesus' miracles happened at a wedding. He was at this wedding party with his family and friends. In those days wedding parties lasted all week, and one of the main staples at these gatherings was wine. One of the most embarrassing things that could happen to someone throwing a party in those days would be to run out of wine. Well, guess what happened? They ran out of wine.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, was upset and asked her son to do something about it. Jesus' initial response was not all that encouraging. He basically said, "So what! What's that to me?" His mother must have turned on the charm because suddenly Jesus had a change of heart and decided to do something about the wine crisis. He asked the servants in the house to fill six of the purification jars with water. Now these jars were normally used to hold water for people to wash with when they entered the house, but they were about to become vessels of God's grace. All six of the jars were filled to the brim and each one contained about 30 gallons of water. Jesus then changed the water to wine. They went from having no wine to over 180 gallons of wine! And not only that, but it was outstanding wine. It wasn't the cheap stuff.

That's how our God operates – "You want wine? I'll give you wine. How about 180 gallons of the best around?" I'm not sure what God is up to here at our church in Mexia, but I have a feeling it's something really, really good. The only question for you and me is, "Are we one of the branches connected to the vine?" On our own we can do nothing, but with God we can do anything.

Our kids are taking swim lessons this summer. Last summer Benjamin took lessons in Corsicana. He has never been afraid of the water and loves to swim. I was the opposite at his age. I was terrified of the water and didn't want any part of jumping off a diving board. One of the kids in Benjamin's class last year reminded me of myself. At the end of the lesson this little girl would have a sheepish look on her face as she made her way to the line at the diving board. That was the last thing they did each day – jump off the diving board. Most of the kids loved it. They would jump off the board into the water below with reckless abandon, but not this girl. This girl would take baby steps to the end of the diving board and then would freeze up. The swim instructor would be

down below in the water begging her to jump. “Come on Megan, jump, jump!” she would say. Then the other kids would join in: “Jump, Jump! What are you chicken?” Finally, the parents who had been melting in the sun waiting for the lesson to be over would encourage her, “Jump Megan, jump! Hurry up, we have to go.”

I’ll never forget what happened next. Megan closed her eyes and finally jumped off the diving board into the arms of the instructor. The look of joy on Megan’s face when she came up out of the water was priceless. In fact, the only person who had a bigger smile than Megan was the instructor who caught her and swam with her back to the edge of the pool.

Maybe that’s how it works with God and us.