

Faith Mennonite Church  
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**Life on the Vine**  
*John 15:1-8*

How many times have we used the metaphor of someone “holding on for dear life.” I think we all have the image fairly well imprinted in our mind from a movie or story: Someone is mountain or rock climbing, or running from danger, and they slip over a steep edge, only to be saved by grasping onto a root, vine, or tree that is miraculously growing out of the rock. There they cling hoping for help to come to their rescue before they lose strength to keep holding on.

We all need something, someone, to hold onto as we go through life. None of us, even in our prime, however we define those “best years” of our lives, can make it alone. We need companionship to meet our needs for intimacy. We need the feedback of others for our personal and professional development. We need others to share a laugh to share food. We need exercise buddies to pull us out of bed and on to the track or into the pool first thing in the morning.

And what about our souls...our spiritual life? What do we hold on to for this most important dimension of our lives? Jesus used the image of a vine to describe the relationship he wished to have with his disciples, and that include us. The vine Jesus described was not the rugged, old, leafless root growing on a rock, but rather a grape vine, a vine that is regularly tended and bears delicious fruit – fruit enjoyed right off the vine, and fruit that becomes an exquisite drink when it is pressed, bottled, and aged. A drink that is not so much to quench thirst but to draw people into conversation, to add sparkle and delight to the best of human encounters.

The itinerant Jesus and his roving followers probably passed vineyards on a regular basis. More than one of Jesus’ parables is set in a vineyard. Jesus used familiar images in his stories and teaching. So his disciples would have quickly grasped what he was referring to when he said: “I am the true vine, and the 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.”

Grapes grow on vines that bear the most fruit when they are regularly tended. Old growth is trimmed out so light can get through the leaves to the grapes. New growth always springs fastest from branches that are pruned. And grapes, when they are cut from the vine, will stay fresh for long periods of time as long as they remain on the cluster attached to their stem.

Jesus said that he is the true vine. He is the one we cling to. We cling, not in a grasping fashion, only reaching out in those desperate crises times in our lives. We cling as ever-connected branches, receiving nourishment, identity, purpose. Our holding on to Jesus the vine means that we become part of what that vine is all about: bearing fruit. The grapes on Jesus the Vine are disciples. We, as Jesus’ disciples, who have received forgiveness and experienced God’s grace, become the sweet fruit for others, sharing the life we have received so that others can also taste the goodness and be grafted on to begin producing their own fruit.

Vines and branches receive their life through photosynthesis and the uptake of water and nutrients through the plant system. For photosynthesis to happen, plants have to be exposed to the sun. We once had a garden in a small yard shaded for most of the day by a two-story house plus an attic. It didn’t matter that we were in Indiana where summer daytime temperatures were regularly in the 80s and there was plenty of water. Without the sun the plants didn’t thrive. I think spiritual photosynthesis happens through prayer; not necessarily of the intercessory or

bidding type, but the mindful awareness that we are constantly in God's presence, asking the Spirit to help us see and experience events from a God's-eye perspective. During Lent we focused on various prayer forms during our children's time and our Sunday School curriculum also incorporates prayer practices in the weekly lessons. The earlier we learn these, the more we can benefit from them and practice them throughout our lives.

And how do we take up the water and nutrients? For many of us gathering for worship each Sunday is a primary way. Yet can one or two hours out of 168 each week really be sufficient to sustain us? Many of us have individual spiritual practices from which we draw on a regular if not daily basis. But we heard in our visioning sessions last September, and at our Council & Commissions retreat in February that there is a hunger for increased opportunities for sharing these practices with others, for challenging and having a system of accountability.

The suggestions from the deacons that we heard a bit ago are good examples: A) gathering in small groups to share faith stories, life experiences and challenges, to read and reflect together on scripture and listen for what the ancient, eternal Word speaks into our words and our lives today. B) joining others for meals in our homes, or at a restaurant, or with our brothers and sisters at the Mennonite Worker house who have the weekly practice of opening their table to others. If any of these are something you would like to make an effort to explore, you'll find a leaf in your bulletin, which we invite you to write your name on, and during our communion service, you can stick your name to the branch that identifies the activity you are interested in.

But this abiding in the vine stuff isn't just "Sweet Jesus and me." There's also the part about pruning. No fruit-bearing plant continues to produce if it doesn't get regularly pruned. Pruning naturally exposes the plant to some cutting, some pain. As branches on Jesus' vine, pruning might come to us through conflict, through disappointment, through illness, through loss, through making a commitment to a new discipline that means changing how we use our time or what we consume. Many of these are not things we seek out; they come to us unbidden. But Jesus said it's God the Gardener, the Creator, the one who knows us through and through who does the pruning. So we can trust that it's for our good. We can trust that the Spirit of Christ will be with us. And we can trust that once we've made a commitment to the Body of Christ, the church, this congregation will support us if we open ourselves to that care.

"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. ... 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."