

**Sermon: Connections John 15:1-8 May 2, 2021 Rev. Steve Clifton
Rideau Park United Church Ottawa, ON**

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower..." Jesus said "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit."

My parents retired to Niagara, near Ontario's wine country. There are so many vineyards in that region of Ontario with more being planted all the time.

German immigrants, coming from the wine making regions of their homeland came to Ontario and found that the land between the Niagara Escarpment and Lake Ontario was an ideal micro climate for growing grape vines. Now in that region the traditional fruit orchards of Niagara are surrounded by vine yards.

It seems that vineyards are everywhere. My brother lives in San Marcos Texas, near Austin and in the dirt dry Texas hill country we were amazed to see vineyards. Wine making has taken its place next to Texas long horn cattle.

In Eastern Ontario, Prince Edward County is home to many vineyards and wineries. I even did a wedding at a winery near Richmond a few years ago. Vineyards are now found close to home.

Grapes have been cultivated by human beings for millennia, in the Near East for over 7,000 years. The world's oldest known winery, found in Armenia, dates from 4,000 years ago. The Sumerian empire, one of earth's earliest civilizations used the grape leaf as a symbol of life.

And in the Hebrew tradition, a vineyard is a symbol for the people of God. In Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel; and Hosea the people of God are called God's vineyard.

Vineyards are commonplace but I know that I don't know much about them. During a tour of a Niagara vineyard a few years back I learned something of how much work goes into maintaining grape vines; pruning, grafting, protecting fruit from bugs and birds.... Vineyards take years to establish. Patience and care are required in growing a vineyard so that it bears good fruit. Expertise is passed on from one generation of vine growers to the next.

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower...Jesus says. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit.

Grape vines are a study in connection. Just under the outer bark of the vine and the branches are two layers necessary for the survival of the plant: the xylem and the phloem.

The xylem carries water and nutrients up from the roots, through the vine, into the branches and the leaves.

The phloem carries sugars, the products of photosynthesis, down from the leaves, through the branches, through the vine, to the roots. It is a connective arrangement that brings life.

The branches lift their leaves up into the sunlight and into the air; the vine digs its roots deep into the earth and down into water. Nourished by the vine, by water and the earth, the leaves raise their faces to the sun and the branches produce fruit; it's a mutual exchange, vine and branches connected together

The German mystic Meister Eckhart wrote that a plum brings forth plums not by an act of will but because it is its nature plums to make plums. So grape vines produce their fruit naturally. And a community gathered around Christ, connecting to Jesus, allowing the Spirit of Christ to flow unimpeded into all the branches, it produces naturally, organically good fruit. Being connected to Christ produces compassion, loving-kindness, mercy, patience, wisdom, love... Jesus is the Vine, we are the branches. The connection alone produces good things. The life of faith springs up from relationship and connection without extraordinary effort beyond the connection.

Here we are once again in lockdown. And connection or lack of it is an issue. We can't be together as we would like to be. For the sake of life and safety we may have to be apart from life giving community, from family and friends. But like roots burrowing down to find moisture, like leaves extending to reach out to the sun, we find new ways to connect.

I would love to be in the sanctuary with everyone today, but sharing something from home is still a way of connecting. I think of familiar faces as I share these words...even though I am preaching to a screen alone I feel connected to a beloved community. We have 350 devices connecting together each week on this webcast. We are connected still through electrons, technology and light. It is still a life giving connection. It still bears good fruit in the lives we are living where we are.

And we are still connected to Christ. God is still with us. The Holy Spirit dwells in each of us. We are still connected to that which gives life.

Meister Eckhart again. Eckhart was a 13th Century teacher and mystic. He is perhaps most famous for his words:

Like...*"If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you, it will be enough."*

Or maybe we can remember his words on the importance of our connection to God:*" I am as sure as I live that nothing is so near to me as God. God is nearer to me than I am to myself; my existence depends on the nearness and the presence of God."*

Or we can recall his words of hope in a dark time: "Truly, it is in the darkness that one finds the light, so when we are in sorrow, then this light is nearest of all to us."

To return to vineyard related imagery, in another of his writings the German mystic spoke of how each of us is like a grand house and that deep within us is a cellar, which we forget about. And that dark deep place is like a valued wine cellar a full of vintage wine...

By this he meant that the Holy Spirit, the life giving Spirit of God dwells deep inside of us. We may forget this. But deep within there is God. We are connected even when we forget.

Another mystic who lived a generation after Eckhart, Catherine of Siena, wrote this:

Keep in mind that each of you has your own vineyard. But everyone is joined to the neighbors' vineyards without any dividing lines. They are so joined together, in fact, that you cannot do good or evil for yourself without doing the same for your neighbors.

We are all of us connected. And so our hearts go out to one another at this time... essential workers, the vulnerable among us, the people of India where the pandemic is raging...

We are connected to all of Gods children and all are connected to God.

May we draw life from this sacred relationship and may we bear the fruit of peace, love and kindness shared with one another.

Amen