

## **The Vine and Branches and the Branch Office (John 15:1-8)**

Pastor Walter Wangerin tells the story of looking for God in church: His father pastored a small rural church in North Dakota on what we call in America “The Great Plains”. As a little boy Walter would go into church when no one else was around, looking for God. Little Wally would crawl around under the pews, looking for God. He would walk quietly behind the church altar, looking for God. Finally, it dawned on him that God was probably hiding in the one place that a little boy could never, ever go – in the women’s restroom. So, on one of his explorations when no one else was around, he checked. God was not there either. Then, one Sunday, as little Walter was sitting in the church service, trying to think of where else he should look for God, his mother came back from Communion and he noticed the smell of the Communion wine. Then the words of the Communion liturgy dawned on him: “That’s where He is! God is there in the bread and wine of Communion!” As a matter of biblical fact, Jesus comes to us with His very body and blood through this Holy Communion. Through these means, He communes with us. He remains with us as we continue in Him through this means of grace.

Now, in the time of our text Jesus had just celebrated the very first Lord’s Supper with His disciples. It is the night when He was about to be betrayed. The taste and smell of the grape wine was in the room and on the breath of all thirteen of them when Jesus spoke to them the words He speaks to us today in this text from John 15. No doubt our Lord had in mind the terrible, terrible betrayal of God’s chosen people who were about to scream, “Crucify! Crucify!” But He also had His apostles and His later pastors and teachers (Ephesians 5) in His heart, as He makes abundantly clear to us all in the upcoming 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of John, His High Priest’s prayer for all of us in His church, down through the centuries.

Smell the presence of God. Let’s take His words into our lives and into our habits and expectations for the ministry. We can, I think, speak here of:

### **The Vine and Branches – and the Branch Office**

Before I sat down to study John’s text, I expected to be preaching a three-part sermon today: 1. The Vine, 2. The Branches, 3. The Fruit, but in fact Jesus and John give us a one-part sermon!

Every vine has branches and every living vine keeps on producing grapes. There you have it. Amen!

Well, not quite. We are here at the Seminary to commune with Jesus and to bring other people into living communion with Him. In our tried and true Lutheran vocabulary, *the Vine* has instituted *the office of the ministry* for this very purpose. This office or appointed work is in evidence in the Old Testament in the office or appointed work of the LORD's prophets, such as Isaiah. Think of the prophets as the pastor's pastors. And these prophets, such as Isaiah in the fifth chapter of his book, all speak of the Lord's passionate desire that His people commune with Him, that they live their lives in harmony with His Word and will:

Let me sing for my beloved  
my love song concerning his vineyard:  
My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.  
<sup>2</sup> He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines;  
he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it;  
and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.  
<sup>3</sup> And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah,  
judge between me and my vineyard.  
<sup>4</sup> What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it?  
When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?  
<sup>5</sup> And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard.  
I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured;  
I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.  
<sup>6</sup> I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briars and thorns shall grow up;  
I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.  
<sup>7</sup> For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel,  
and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting;  
and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed;  
for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!

Vine-and-branches, Vine-and-branches-and-fruit. It's a package deal. No wonder that Jesus had been weeping over Jerusalem just a couple of days earlier and will be telling the women along His way to Calvary the very next day, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but for yourselves and your children ... For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry" (Luke 23:28-31).

As we should know from our text and its nearby context, there is something more than a comparison going on here. God the Father, Jesus explains in a bit, is the vine dresser. Jesus

Himself, the very Son of God, is the Vine (meaning *the* vine preached by the prophets, such as Isaiah). The branches are His disciples. But what about the fruit? One Lutheran standard in New Testament commentaries says,

The fruit of the branches consists in grapes. What this fruit in reality is, is plainly told in Scripture: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance,” Gal. 5:22, 23; “in all goodness and righteousness and truth,” Eph. 5:9; “the peaceable fruit of righteousness,” Heb. 12:11. “And this I pray that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment; that ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ; being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God,” Phil. 1:9–11. A branch may have but little of such fruit, but as long as it draws life from the vine, some of the fruit will be found.<sup>1</sup>

But is this word from and about Jesus in John 15 merely about Christian virtues? I don’t think so. It’s clear that the fruit the branches will inevitably produce by means of the apostles is *the saving of other souls*. After all, the fruits of the Spirit that Paul catalogues in his epistles and that we have laid out for us in Hebrews are not an end in themselves. The purpose here – the way that we give proper glory or weight to God – is not so much that we sing His praises louder and louder, but rather that we bring more and more human beings into the chorus!

We know that the Vine Himself established the work to which we are called. So for example in Ephesians 4 we read, “<sup>11</sup> And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, <sup>12</sup> to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, <sup>13</sup> until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ ... “

Well, then. How shall we, as His pastors and teachers do this work – how shall we faithfully carry on the office of preaching and the Word? In a Word, by devoting ourselves to preaching and the Word. We need to think of our office of the ministry as a Branch office, so to speak.

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<sup>1</sup> Lenski, R. C. H. (1961). *The interpretation of St. John’s gospel* (p. 1030). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House.

Everything depends upon our being in a living relationship to Jesus, just as grapes on the vine are in a living, sap-fed relationship with the vine and the branches. Lenski urges us to count the number of times that Jesus tells His disciples in the text, “Remain in Me.” Then he goes on to say,

“And I in you” sounds as though [Jesus] were giving himself a command to remain in us. But the words are really a promise that he will remain in us. We in him, and he in us. These always go together. Jesus himself is in us when by faith we remain in him. The very Word and the Sacrament through which we remain in him convey him to us, to rest in us and to lodge his gifts in us. The Sacrament in particular is rightly called “a consolation of all distressed hearts, and a firm bond of union of Christians with Christ, their Head,” *C. Triglotta*, 987, 44. Since the disciples are already in Jesus, no stress should be laid on the order, as though we must first be in him, and then he will be in us. The two are simultaneous. As our hearts expand under his grace, so he fills them with his grace.<sup>2</sup>

We rightly expect our Lord to remain among us (the “you” throughout our text is plural; Jesus is not talking about individuals in isolation from others), but we also expect that you will be remaining in Him, that is, that you will be faithfully using and administering the Sacraments, faithfully using and preaching the Word. Keep in mind and in your work, my dear brothers, that our office begins and ends with the Vine Himself. Our work, the office of the ministry, is a matter of The Vine and Branches, the communion which our Lord has established and still maintains. We are pastors in the office of His ministry, Jesus’ church on earth is His Branch Office. Smell the wine. He is with us. So abide in Him as He has committed Himself to abide with us. Amen!

Rev Dr Gregory P Schulz  
Professor of Philosophy, Concordia University Wisconsin  
[gregory.schulz@cuw.edu](mailto:gregory.schulz@cuw.edu)  
The Lutheran Seminary in Tshwane  
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<sup>2</sup> Lenski.