

# **A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church**

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## **“One Branch to Another”**

**John 15: 1-8**

**May 14, 2006**

Do you get the image? You do, don't you? It'd probably help if we lived in the first century or perhaps in Northern California, but still you get this, don't you?

There's a vine and True Vine... Jesus

And there are branches... you and me... all of us.

And there's a gardener, God, who tends to it all with skill, care, and precision.

We get the image... they'd have been all over it. Not only were there vineyards all over the place... and not only was there wine served at every meal and flowing at every celebration. But, it was one of the preferred Old Testament metaphors... the whole vineyard, vine, fruit thing.

In Hosea... there a luxuriant vine.

In Jeremiah... a degenerate vine.

In Ezekiel... a vine in the vineyard full of fruit.

One of the Psalms (80) talks... sings about a vine brought from Egypt planted in the mountains of Israel. And Isaiah sings a prophetic little tune about a vineyard gone bad... but he also talks about a branch sprouting up from the stump.

It's just everywhere in the Old Testament... as apple pie and Eagles are to America... vines and vineyards were to Israel. In fact in the year 68, when they rebelled against Rome they minted their own coins and guess what was on the coins... a vine.

So, when Jesus starts talking wine or fruit of the vine... they're all over it.

As serious as Baptists take scripture and as often as Jesus talks about wine, it's amazing that tea-toddling Baptists developed. He always talks about wine. He did it again here in John 15... and they knew what he was getting at.

He's the vine...

We're the branches...

Better stay connected for the sake of good fruit.

We've got to abide.

They got it... we get it. You're a branch and I'm a branch. It seems simple enough and I guess it is, or should be but. Honestly, for me... it doesn't really seem to be so simple. If it is for you, that's fine and good... it really is. But I thought I might share with you some of my own experience in the vineyard... one branch, honestly to another.

First of all, even though I believe in a Good Gardener, watching and tending and pruning, the vineyard I live in often seems kind of untended. Vines, other kinds of vines, running everywhere.

My life feels like the fence around my yard... I can count at least 5 different kinds of vines and it's just almost impossible to tell which vine and which leaf go together. They're all weaving in and out of one another... stuff I planted and stuff just coming up.

Good vines and bad... all mixed in and that's the way my vineyard often feels... just one branch being honest with another.

I know I'm supposed to abide in the True Vine... I know that, but honestly, I get distracted by other things. Sometimes I can't see the Vine. There's just so much...

Getting the bills paid... or getting ahead.

Getting the beds made... the kids raised.

Keeping the marriage in tact... a church running.

It may disappoint you to hear it but there are days I wake up and even if I wanted to abide I wouldn't know where the Vine is.

It did seem simpler to me once upon a time, and maybe it will be again, but a lot of the time it doesn't for me.

And I think... I know... a part of what I've done along the way, just one branch's testimony here... is that I've grafted myself onto other vines growing out there. And the other vines aren't bad...

Family... education... work... friends... In the course of being a branch, I've found myself really connected there, abiding there. It's just what seemed to happen to me... day in and day out, you keep doing life... year in and year out... and it's like parts of me are attached to so many things now.

Some really important... some probably not...

And what I've come to feel as a branch, in the midst of and attached to all those vines, is a kind of withering... any other branches here, know what I'm talking about?

It begins to be a problem...

At some point it starts to be deadly...

And you hear a text like this one and say well, I better abide. And it sounds so nice read in church and maybe it even sounds simple. **“Just read the bible some more and pray some more or get your priorities straight...”** and that'd all be fine... but something in me says, it's not quite so simple.

Just an act of the will.

Again, this is just one branch's experience. Deciding to abide, doesn't seem like all there is to it. **“I... will abide.”** Probably a good place to get to but I think I do feel like a branch on a crowded, confusing trellis, sometimes trying to will its way to something it can see... that True Vine.

... Know I've got to get there... abide there. It's essential. By the way, that word is all over John's gospel. It gets translated... “abide” or “live” or “stay” or “remain” or “dwell.”

**“Dwell in me... remain in me.”** Jesus uses it eight times here, right in a row.

**“Remain... remain... remain...”**

**“I want to, I want to, I want to.”**

But... just one branch to another... often it seems my connections are pretty iffy... and my fruit pretty sour as a result of it. So, then I start looking at my fruit.

Trying to work on my fruit...

polish it up...

like that's going to help.

I try harder to have better fruit, even though Jesus makes it clear here, that's impossible to do. My efforts to be tasty and worthy of a vintage wine aren't going to be much help.

But sometimes, that's where I wind up focusing. ... and occasionally even see what I think are some results and feel real proud of them... **“Nice fruit, I'm bearing there.”**

The pride in my apparent juicy fruit is always short-lived ... It's just not that great, really. And so, then after all my efforts, I begin wondering about the bugs in the vineyard and maybe even that snake I've heard so much about.

A branch can get discouraged. At least I have... I did...

And honestly, that's probably the best place for a branch, not dwelling in the vine, to get to. To finally say, "**enough.**" To finally be done with all your trying and tweaking. ... Working hard to be good or better or best.

Polishing fruit...

networking...

kingdom building.

You finally get tired enough... or hungry enough... shriveled enough.

Maybe that's when the gardener starts to work... and starts this pruning business. Which sounds to me like a painful thing... your under the knife. And I'm pretty sure it is, for the most part, painful. All the stuff we've gathered around us... starts being removed... this isn't going to be a party.

Maybe it's just life and the stuff of life that God uses but most of the pruning I've been through has not been pleasant... And I'm pretty certain God isn't through yet, which is scary. It's all about subtraction and what is being removed.

This is just one branch trying to say honestly that, in the second half of life, nothing that really teaches us doesn't first hurt us. It may not be true for you but it has been for me. The gift to us comes only in the taking away, the cutting away from us.

Somewhere in that giving up and in the pruning that happens... my experience as a branch is that there were moments where I felt something flow into me from the Vine. It was just there... a gift of grace. A surge of life from the True Vine... sacred sap that found the heart.

And then, at least for a moment, the connection could be seen.

**"I'm not alone... I'm a part of the vine... What is in the Vine is in me."**

And the word "**abide**" starts to be something I know, not just something I want or need, but I know... beyond definition... it's a reality that I experience. And it's so wonderful, it becomes all there is. It becomes the point. The vital reality...

To be in the Vine is to live and to not be in the Vine is to die... maybe a slow, shriveling, death. Dwell and die... that is the situation. To be or not to be.

Jesus begins the teaching with one of his most favorite phrases. "**I am...**" Ego eimi... it's a Greek phrase that John loves and records for us 25 times.

**"I am... the bread of life... the good shepherd... the light of the world... the way, the truth, the life resurrection... I am the True Vine."**

Ego Eimi... it's a word about being. I am... sheer being... The Life of life, as Paul says who is, "**above all, in all, and through all...**" and in whom we "**live and move and have our being...**" The reality in whom we must dwell or die. The creative power of the universe... made known to us in Christ... and flowing to us through Christ.

It really is to be or not to be.

And now, knowing that, seeing it and tasting it... we can begin to do the work of abiding. At least, that's been one branch's experience.

Branches can awaken to their connection to the vine. They can become conscious of that and begin to sense that the very life that is in Jesus is in them. The Life of life, which gives life to every branch, flows more fully as a branch awakens.

My experience in the vineyard is that as we see this, things change. We don't look at pruning the same way, we don't resist it. We quit worrying about fruit... we don't work at that... that just is. And we see, finally see, that our existence in the vine is a beautiful gift, all mercy.

And so we tend to the connection...

We see our shared life with other branches...

Never threatened by who they are and their uniqueness.

Certainly not needing to shape them into our image.

Certainly not being afraid of them.

Trusting ever deeper in the gardener...

And sharing in the gardener's delight that such good fruit becomes such a fine wine, which blesses the world.

There's one more thing... about being a branch and about remaining... and about this gardener who prunes and who, Jesus says, **"cuts off the branches that bear no fruit"** and since vines can't be used really, they're used for kindling. There were no Hobby Lobby's in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. There's nothing left to do but burn them. It's an honest metaphor.

But I want to tell you a sneaking suspicion I have about this Gardener. There have been times when I haven't abided... In fact, I'm pretty sure I was disconnected from the Vine and shriveled and dead and not worth much except for kindling.

And it seems to me, that by some miracle and mercy, this Gardener, decided to graft me back into the Vine. That's my suspicion, anyway.

And, I think that's the gospel... that what is dead is brought back to life by the power of God. What is far off is brought near.

So, don't give up on the branch that you are.

And don't give up on this Gardener.

Believe in Him...

And trust what he is doing in you. There is good fruit that is going to be borne from the unique branch that you are... And this will be **"The Father's Glory"**, and by this, the world will know that we belong to Jesus.